

# The Voyages of Discovery and Conquest of the Americas, 1492-1522

## Eduqas GCSE History

### Component 1: Non - British Study in Depth

#### Reasons for the voyages of discovery.

#### What factors contributed to the European voyages of discovery?

**Power of Spain and Portugal; the search for new routes to Asia – south eastern, south western routes**

The European voyages of discovery were in many ways one of the most important developments in European and indeed world history. It was a key period when the 'Old World' or Europe, Asia and Africa came into increasing contact and in many ways conflict, with the 'New World' of the Americas. The results of this globalisation were far reaching and had extremely significant social, economic, political and religious implications that shaped the modern world. The fifteenth century was a period when several factors combined to create the conditions needed for the voyages to take place. Trade, religion, technology and curiosity were all part of the drive that would usher in a new period in world history.

The two greatest maritime powers during this period were Spain and Portugal, although during the early fourteenth century they did not exist in their current form. The Iberian Peninsula was divided into kingdoms – those of Portugal, Castile, Aragon, Navarre and Granada. In what may be termed modern Spain, the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon were the most powerful, but conflict between the various kingdoms had meant that for much of the fifteenth century, overseas expansion was unimportant. However, it would be the marriage in 1469 between Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile that would essentially create the basis of modern Spain. The driving out of the Muslim Moors from southern Spain during the Reconquista ('reconquest') would encourage a drive to colonial expansion that committed Spain to search for new trading opportunities and overseas routes.

During the fourteenth century, the kingdom of Portugal had gradually expanded its maritime trade and had begun exploring the west coast of Africa. One of the results of this was increasing rivalry with Castile, for example over claims to ownership of the Canary Islands. In 1415, the Portuguese had conquered the city of Ceuta opposite Gibraltar and this enabled the Portuguese to establish control over navigating the African coast. The key figure during this period was Prince Henry the Navigator who

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sought to expand Portuguese trade and influence in West Africa. He sponsored voyages in the region, gradually extending the Portuguese influence further along the West African coast. By 1482 Cape Bojador had been passed, which served to open the area to exploration. By the 1480s further exploration of the south eastern route had taken place along the coast of Africa which increased the rivalry between Spain and Portugal.

The preoccupation with the south eastern route had led to the Portuguese rejecting Columbus' proposals for voyaging west. King John II of Portugal was focused upon two routes: via land and sea through Egypt and Ethiopia to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and the second around the African coast, which would be eventually pioneered by Bartholomew Diaz. Portugal eventually emerged as the dominant force in the area which partly accounts for the Spanish looking towards the west as a means of expanding trade routes and influence.



**Source 1: Prince Henry the Navigator, who played an important role in stimulating European exploration during this period**

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The idea of a south western route to Asia had been widespread among many navigators, but during this period the consensus was that the journey was impracticable and the 'ocean sea' was considered a distance to cross that was beyond the capability of the time. As will shortly be discussed, Christopher Columbus argued that Cipango, or Japan, could be reached by sailing 2,500 nautical miles west of the Canary Islands. The results of his journey are well known, but not so the journey of Pedro Cabral who in 1500 set out on a voyage to India following Vasco de Gama's route around Africa but landed in modern day Brazil. Claiming the land for Portugal he then proceeded to sail east to India.

### Trade and religious factors; technological advances

Trade with the Middle East and Asia had been well established for many centuries and had made especially the Italian city states such as Venice and Genoa extremely wealthy. The period of the Crusades had further stimulated trade, with the cities having a virtual monopoly over transporting supplies to the Crusader Kingdoms. The trade in spices and silk was especially important. It was after all, via the Silk Road from China that the Black Death had found one of its routes to Europe. Spices were in much demand, being used in perfumes, medicine and religious ceremonies, among other things. Traders had made their way across arduous land routes and mainly Muslim traders had brought goods from Asia by sea to the Middle East from where they made their way to Europe. However, the length of the journey meant that numerous middlemen were able to take their cut and therefore increase the cost of the products. The routes were also affected by changing political circumstances, with hostile powers being able to further increase charges and disrupt the flow of trade.

One of the key trade related factors in the search for new routes was the fall of the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, in 1453 to the growing Ottoman Empire, ruled by the Turks. The poor relationship between the Muslim Turks and the Christian West led to the Turks closing the trade routes across their Empire to Christian traders. The effect of this was to dramatically increase prices of goods such as spices and silk. This therefore provided an incentive to find new routes to the East. Another underlying cause linked to trade was of course wealth. The desire and demand for gold and silver were extremely strong, especially since the trade routes to the East had been severed. Of course, the eventual discovery of large amounts of precious goods in Central America would further stimulate exploration and expansion.

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Religious fervour undoubtedly played an important part in the desire to push the boundaries of exploration. The strength of Catholicism in the Middle Ages, epitomised by the response to the call for the Crusades, had created the idea of a militant Christianity. By the fifteenth century this had been translated into the desire of captains and explorers to convert, as part of their duty, new peoples to Christianity. The idea of divine mission became inextricably linked with the desire for wealth and the expansion of trade. The strength of the religious fervour also helps to explain the violence that was to become associated with especially the Spanish conquest of the Americas, with the fight against the tribes of Central America being part of the desire to impose the word of God in the form of Catholicism.

Technological advances were also crucial in enabling this period of exploration to take place and when considered with the above factors help to explain the precise timing in history of European expansion. At the start of the fifteenth century, the ships used by Europeans were in many ways inferior to those used by Chinese and Arab traders. However, during this period the design of the caravel ship improved dramatically. Northern European caravels were limited by their size, but were sturdy with the square sail necessitating a relatively small crew. The southern Mediterranean style caravel had been favoured but its use a triangular or lateen sail had required a larger crew to operate it at the expense of cargo space. It was by combining design elements from the two that the carrack emerged. This ship used the sturdy northern style to withstand rough seas and had both square and triangular sails, the latter to help it tack into the wind. The development of a stern rudder that remained in the water improved the manoeuvrability of ships and the result of these developments was that long-distance voyages now became feasible.

Advances in map making and navigation were also exceptionally important. By 1400, coastal maps of Europe and the Mediterranean were improving in their accuracy. Portolan charts, as they were known, were further developed as especially Portuguese explorers mapped the coast of Africa the further along it they progressed. However, the increased knowledge was not widely disseminated as countries preferred to keep a monopoly on knowledge in order to protect their trading interests in these regions.

Navigational developments gave sailors the confidence to venture further out to sea. European sailors had been using compasses since the thirteenth century. Sailors also made increasing use of instruments such as the astrolabe and quadrant, which enabled them to calculate their latitude via the position of the sun and North Star. These measurements were often inaccurate however due to the rocking of the boat at sea,

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but they did provide at least some guidance about the ship's direction. A satisfactory method of measuring longitude however, was not devised until the eighteenth century.

In conclusion therefore, Spain and Portugal were ideally placed to lead the way in exploration due to their geographical position and their use of astronomical, geographical and mathematical knowledge, much of it gained through the work of Arabs. The time was therefore ripe for the exploration to commence.

## Voyages of Columbus

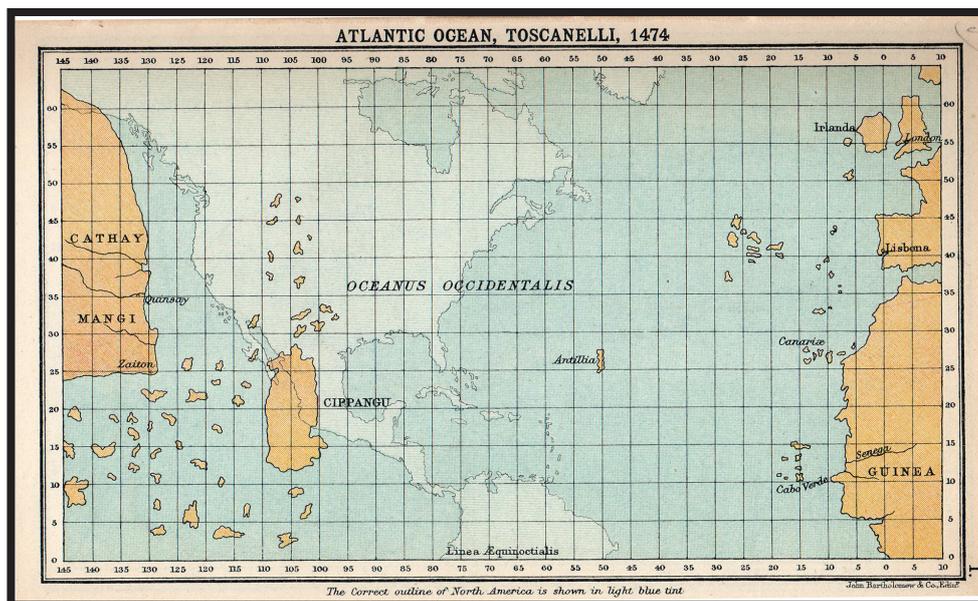
### Why were the voyages and discoveries of Columbus so significant?

#### Background to Columbus' expedition

The pioneer of westward exploration during this period was of course Christopher Columbus. Born in the Italian city of Genoa in 1451 he was an experienced navigator, having sailed as far north as Iceland and down to the African coast. He used the calculations of the Italian geographer Toscanelli to assume that the journey westwards across the 'ocean sea' to Asia was around 2500 to 3500 miles. The true distance was of course around four times as far, but Columbus was convinced that such a journey was feasible and that the rewards for undertaking the voyage would be immense, opening up a new route to the wealth of the East.

Finding support for his proposed expedition was not easy however. The Portuguese under King John II were more interested in exploring the African route to the East and Columbus' calculations were rejected as being flawed. Columbus now sought support in Spain but once again it was not forthcoming, with the Spanish crown being preoccupied with the fight against the Moors in Southern Spain. Several years of frustration were endured by Columbus, but the conquest of Granada in 1492 and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by the Portuguese and the subsequent expansion of their power, gave the Spanish crown the incentive to support Columbus' plan. As a result, after a personal audience with Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand they agreed to Columbus' considerable demands for titles over the lands he should discover, as well as his demand for a tenth of any wealth found. The costs of the expedition were considered worth the risk given the rewards that would accrue should Columbus be successful.

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**Source 2: A modern version of Toscanelli's view of the world. Cippangu is Japan and Cathay is China**

## 1492 and 1493 voyages and discoveries; settlement at Hispaniola

Columbus' first voyage commenced from Palos on August 3rd 1492, with the expedition made up of three ships – the carrack Santa Maria and two caravels the Nina and Pinta, owned and piloted by the Pinzon brothers. After resupplying at the Canary Islands then Gran Canaria in early September, the voyage continued westward for another five weeks. It appears that the crew became increasingly restless as the days passed by and Columbus gave the crew false information about the distance they had come in order to placate them. By October, tensions on board the ships had increased, but were allayed early on the morning of October 12th when a lookout on the Pinta, Rodrigo de Triana, spotted land, although Columbus later claimed the credit and hence the reward of a pension for life for being the first to sight land.

The island in the Bahamas they landed on was called, in the language of the Arawak natives, Guanahani. Columbus claimed the land for the Spanish crown and named it San Salvador. Exploration of the immediate vicinity did not however, yield the gold Columbus had hoped for, despite the compliance of the natives and Columbus' tactic of holding some hostage until the source of the gold was revealed to him. Further exploration took place which revealed the existence of Cuba and then Haiti, where Columbus landed on December 5th, naming it Hispaniola.

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However, despite these discoveries, Columbus did not find the quantities of gold he had anticipated and further misfortune befell the expedition when on December 25th the Santa Maria became grounded on a sandbank and was lost. Leaving thirty-nine men to build a fort at the settlement of La Navidad, Columbus continued his exploration along the coast of Hispaniola until finally opting to return to Spain after a brief conflict with the aggressive Ciguayos tribe, some of which were kidnapped and taken back to Spain.



**Source 3: Columbus landing on San Salvador, as depicted in 1847 by the artist John Vanderlyn**

One important feature of his return journey however, was his picking up the westerly trade winds from Bermuda, which would firmly establish the viability of the route to and from the New World. Poor weather on the return journey would force the Nina to seek shelter in the Azores and then to dock at Lisbon on March 4th 1493. A meeting took place with Bartholomew Diaz and then King John II who tried unsuccessfully to lay claim to Columbus' discoveries. Finally returning to Palos on March 15th, Columbus was awarded the title 'Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the Islands that he hath discovered in the Indies' by Isabella and Ferdinand, who despite being somewhat disappointed by the meagre amounts of gold brought back, could nevertheless see the prospects for trade and wealth that had been created by Columbus. The monarchs soon opened negotiations with Portugal and the Papacy to ensure the islands were recognised as Spanish possessions. This was eventually

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agreed in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, in which on the basis of Papal instructions, divided the African and New World discoveries between Spain and Portugal. Columbus himself was convinced that he had discovered islands off the coast of eastern Asia, but despite the scepticism of many, it was agreed by the monarchy that further investigation was worthwhile.

In September 1493, Columbus left Cadiz with a much larger fleet of seventeen ships. Comprising of priests, soldiers, tradesmen and farmers, the expedition was almost a mini-society designed to settle the island of Hispaniola. The settlement would be followed by the further exploration of the area. The journey through the Antilles saw Columbus come into contact with several islands such as Dominica, Montserrat and Antigua, as well as the Virgin Islands. However, the relatively swift and trouble free journey was marred on their return to the settlement on Hispaniola. The fort at La Navidad was found to be destroyed by the natives, with the Spanish colonists killed.

Columbus now attempted to establish a second settlement, named Isabela. However, the site was poorly chosen, being on an unhealthy and unprotected shore. The result was that the settlement failed, much of it eventually being destroyed in a hurricane. The difficulties in settling the region were compounded by Columbus' inabilities as an administrator. Maintaining discipline among the Spanish settlers was difficult, since many were more concerned with finding gold and slaves than planting crops, building settlements and clearing forests. Conflicts with the natives increased and the enemies that Columbus had made during his rapid rise ensured that stories of atrocities and the mismanagement of the islands were quickly sent to Spain. On returning to Spain in 1496, his brother abandoned the settlement at Isabela, relocating to build the town of Santa Domingo.

Despite the increasing problems associated with developing the Spanish settlements and with Columbus and his brothers' maladministration of the islands, he was allowed a third journey in 1498. Discovering Trinidad he returned to Hispaniola to find the colony in chaos. The Spanish treatment of native populations had worsened considerably. The effects of this were to increase tensions between natives and Spanish and indeed between the Spanish themselves. On Hispaniola, the peaceful Tainos tribe were being driven to the point of war due to the never ending Spanish demands for gold, food and women. The Spanish settlers themselves, hungry and facing daily hardships adapting to life in the region, were openly contemptuous of the authority of Columbus and his brothers. The result, in 1499, was the appointment of Francisco de Bobadilla to replace Columbus and conduct an investigation into complaints against him. These

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complaints included accusations of torture and brutality against the natives, as well as incompetent management. Columbus was returned to Spain as a prisoner and although his titles were eventually restored by the monarchs, he was prohibited from visiting the islands he discovered and from interfering with their governance.

The effects of Columbus' voyages were far-reaching. In terms of the native population the Spanish demanded tribute of produce and gold and controlled the population through the repartimiento system which forced natives to undertake labour for the Spanish for little or no pay for a certain amount of time. Although technically it was not slavery, the conditions were horrendous and partly contributed to the reduction in native population. European diseases such as smallpox and measles, to which the natives had no resistance, ravaged the population; crops were destroyed by animals brought over from Europe and the severity of Spanish military action against any native resistance further contributed to the considerable decline in their numbers. Since the Spanish were reluctant even unwilling to undertake any agricultural work themselves, the eventual result was that slave-raiding in the Bahamas increased and imported labour was needed to ensure the continued development of the settlements.

Columbus' voyages therefore had devastating consequences for the native populations of the islands in the region, which were decimated in numbers by a combination of factors that came about as a result of contact with Europeans. For Spain however, the result would be an opening up of the New World and an expansion of an empire that would dominate the region for the next three centuries.

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## The explorers

What were the main developments in European exploration during this period?

### The explorers: Bartholomew Diaz; Vasco de Gama; Amerigo Vespucci

As previously discussed, the late fifteenth century saw the convergence of a range of factors that enabled the Voyages of Discovery to take place. The search for a route around Africa to Asia was pioneered by the Portuguese and the expeditions of Prince Henry the Navigator had been a major stimulus for further exploration. One of the most prominent of these explorers was Bartholomew Diaz, born in around 1450. Although very little is known about his early life, it is clear that he was at the court of King John II and had considerable sailing experience. These factors led to John appointing Diaz to lead an expedition to search for a sea route to India.

In August 1487, Diaz led an expedition comprising of three ships which left the port of Lisbon, following the route that had been established by his predecessors, such as Diogo Cao who had explored the mouth of the Congo River and had travelled further south to Angola. Portuguese progress along the coast had been marked by the use of padroes, or markers made of limestone that were used to stake claim to the land as well as being a guide to subsequent expeditions

After leaving a supply ship with nine Portuguese guards at a place called Angra do Salto, the expedition proceeded south but was blown off course by a storm. Sailing away from the dangerous coastline Diaz was able to pick up south-easterly winds and on February 3rd 1488 spotted land three hundred miles to the east of the Cape of Good Hope. However, due to low supplies and an almost mutinous crew, it was agreed that the expedition should turn back, with a padroe left at Kwaihoek in the modern day Eastern Cape to mark the extent of the Portuguese exploration.

However, despite making a triumphant return to Lisbon, Diaz was removed from positions of authority due to King John's disappointment with Diaz's failure to make contact with two Portuguese explorers who had set out across the overland route through Ethiopia to the east coast. Diaz would come to prominence again however, when, as part of a large expedition to India led by Pedro Cabral, Brazil was reached. However, upon crossing the Atlantic en route to India, the fleet encountered a storm that destroyed four of the ships, during which Diaz was killed.

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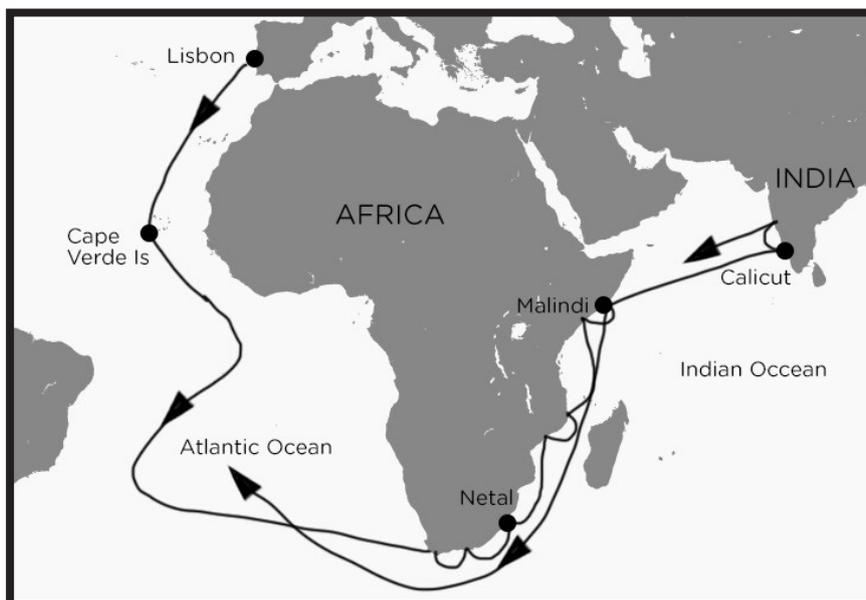
The pioneering efforts of Diaz were continued and built upon by Vasco da Gama. Diaz had acted as a shipbuilding consultant to da Gama and then as a member of his expedition to India, although Diaz did not complete the journey, returning to Guinea. Vasco da Gama's voyage to India which was completed in May 1498 was a pivotal journey in opening up the eastern sea routes to Asia. As with Diaz, relatively little is known about his early life apart from his noble upbringing. By the early 1490s however, he was in the service of John II and then his successor King Manuel, who enthusiastically pursued the idea of finding a direct sea route to India. The success of Diaz in rounding the Cape of Good Hope was an enormous stimulus to further exploration.

In 1497 therefore, Manuel appointed da Gama leader of an expedition to India comprising of four ships, led by the flagship St Gabriel. Leaving in early July the expedition sailed for several months, eventually rounding the Cape and making its way into the as yet uncharted waters of the Indian Ocean. However, sickness forced the fleet to rest at Mozambique for a month, during which time repairs could be undertaken. Continuing the journey onto modern day Kenya, the fleet then undertook a three week voyage across the Indian Ocean, finally reaching Calicut in India on May 20th 1498.

Despite da Gama's confusion about the religion of the Indians – he had not heard of Hinduism before, the expedition was welcomed and eventually stayed for three months in Calicut. This however, was not to the liking of Muslim traders who resented the interference of Christians in what had previously been their monopoly. In August, the return journey began, but coinciding with the monsoon season many of the crew succumbed to illness, especially scurvy. What was left of the expedition eventually reached Lisbon in July 1499 – only 54 out of 170 expedition members survived.

Da Gama received a hero's welcome and there can be no doubting the significance of his accomplishment, firmly establishing the maritime route to India. Another consequence of his journey was that rivalry between the Portuguese and Muslim traders now became far more aggressive. In 1502 for example, da Gama led another expedition of twenty ships to India, under the instructions to further strengthen and extend Portuguese influence in the area. The result was that da Gama and his crew followed a policy of terrorising Muslim ports on the east coast of Africa, on occasions undertaking massacres. Portuguese dominance was also forced upon Calicut and da Gama sought to make alliances with local rulers. Returning to Portugal in 1503, da Gama essentially retired until King John III appointed him Viceroy in India in 1524, the same year in which he would die.

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### Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India 1497-8

The journeys of Diaz and da Gama firmly established the dominance of Portugal in around the coast of Africa into the Indian Ocean. However, the Spanish drive to establish dominance in the New World was continued by the work of Amerigo Vespucci, who despite being Italian, moved to Spain in his twenties and later came into contact with Columbus. This meeting apparently stimulated his interest in exploration, upon which he possibly first embarked in 1497. Some controversy exists over this, as the evidence comes from letters that Vespucci might or might not have written. What is certain is that in 1499 Vespucci, along with the explorer Alonso de Ojeda, undertook an expedition that explored the northern coast of South America.

In 1501 Vespucci undertook another journey, this time in the service of King Manuel of Portugal. Assuming command of the expedition en route, Vespucci's ships explored the coast of South America, principally that of Brazil, discovering Rio de Janeiro and possibly Rio de la Plata. It was in letters written by Vespucci that the term New World was applied, principally in *Mundus Novus* which was published in 1502. Vespucci's fame was further enhanced after 1507 when the German map maker Martin Waldseemuller published translations of letters supposedly written by Vespucci describing his voyages, in a book on cosmology and geography entitled *Cosmographiae Introductio*. The suggestion was made that the New World be named America, the feminine version of Americus, the Latin form of Amerigo.

The disease did not of course discriminate and several Indian leaders perished during the epidemic that

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**Source 4: A depiction of cannibalism illustrated for Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*, published in 1505**

### The journey of Magellan 1519-22; the Spanish settlement of Central America 1509-10

The increasing amounts of valuable spices that were being brought back from Asia, principally via the routes pioneered by the Portuguese, were much coveted by the Spanish and it was in the service of King Charles I of Spain that Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer, would embark upon the most ambitious maritime journey to date – to reach the Spice Islands of the East by sailing westward.

Born around 1480 Magellan gained considerable experience aboard Portuguese expeditions in the Indian Ocean and in the vicinity of the eastern Spice Islands, battling against Egyptian ships in the Arabian Sea and taking part in the conquest of Malacca in modern Malaysia. However, he fell out of favour with the Portuguese crown and moved to Spain where he gained the support of Charles I for his proposal to find a shorter route to the east across the Atlantic, around South America and across the Pacific Ocean. The Spanish crown provided considerable support for the venture and the financial rewards offered to Magellan in terms of rights to any territorial and financial gains made were equally generous. Five ships, comprising a crew of 270, led by the flagship *Trinidad*, were provided by the monarchy.

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Departing from Seville in August 1519, the ships sailed to Cape Verde off the African coast, evading Portuguese ships. By early December the east coast of South America was reached and a search lasting several months for the strait that Magellan believed would take them to the Pacific Ocean was undertaken. However, due to deteriorating weather conditions it was decided to establish winter quarters at a temporary settlement Puerto San Julian, or Port Julian.

However, discontent amongst members of the crew was now widespread. Three out of the five captains mutinied, to which Magellan responded ruthlessly. According to the journal kept by Magellan's assistant Antonio Pigafetta, two of the three captains were killed or executed and the other left marooned on the coast. Several others were drawn and quartered as a result of the mutiny being crushed.

As the journey resumed its journey down the east coast in September 1520, one of the ships, the Santiago was lost in a storm, although the crew survived. This delayed the voyage of the remaining ships until the weather improved, but on October 21st on reaching Cape Virgenes, Magellan and his crew became convinced they had reached the route to the Pacific. There followed an epic, dangerous 350 mile journey through a passage that was deep, rock-walled, long and prone to thick fog. During the journey one of the ships, the San Antonio, deserted and headed back to Spain, but on November 28th the remaining three ships finally cleared the strait, entering the Pacific Ocean.



Source 5: A map showing the Strait of Magellan

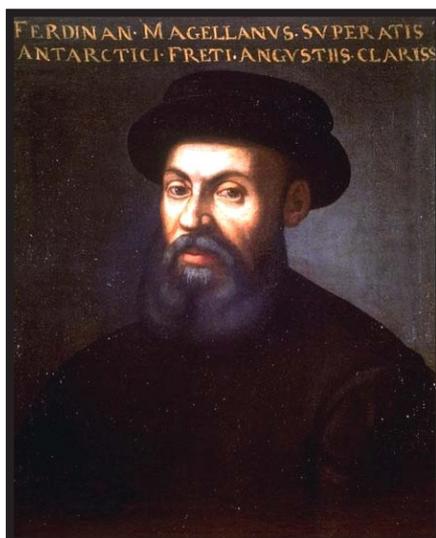
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Despite this achievement the expedition now discovered the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, sailing north-westerly for fourteen weeks without sighting land. Conditions aboard the ships now became horrendous, with starvation and scurvy rife. Finally on March 16th they reached the Philippines, being the first Europeans to do so. In early April they landed at Cebu where the Rajah Humabon converted to Christianity as a result of befriending Magellan. However, Magellan now became embroiled in a local quarrel between Humabon and his enemy Lapu-Lapu of Mactan. Supporting Humabon, Magellan and a small force landed on Mactan on April 27th, but in the ensuing battle against the forces of Lapu-Lapu, Magellan was killed and his body never recovered.

The survivors now made their way westward, eventually into waters already known to the Portuguese. One ship had been abandoned due to the lack of remaining crew members. Pigafetta recorded the wealth of Brunei on a thirty-five day stop there, but by the time the two ships reached the Spice Islands, or Maluku Islands, only 115 crew members remained. It was upon leaving the islands that the Trinidad was forced to remain due to taking on water, leaving the sole remaining ship the Victoria to continue the journey, commencing on December 21st. Five months later the Cape of Good Hope was rounded and finally on September 6th 1522, after losing and abandoning some more crew members, the Victoria, captained by Juan Sebastian Elcano arrived in Spain.

Only 18 men out of the original crew returned on board the Victoria. Elcano however, had completed the first circumnavigation of the world, which by the standards of any period was an astonishing achievement. The expedition effectively opened up the world to maritime exploration and trade. The impact when measured in terms of religion, language, colonisation and culture was immense. Magellan's route would be followed by other navigators, for example Francis Drake and the very name Magellan would become synonymous with the circumnavigation of the globe, despite the fact he did not live to complete the voyage.

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**Source 6: An anonymous 16th or 17th century portrait of Ferdinand Magellan**

The years following Columbus' pioneering voyages saw the Spanish increasingly trying to settle Central America. The conditions were extremely difficult for the Europeans with the aforementioned lack of labour a major problem. As a result many sought to move on from Hispaniola, settling on other islands where it was assumed the natives could provide the required labour. For example, in 1509 Juan de Esquivel began the settlement of Jamaica. Hispaniola therefore began to serve as a starting point for further exploration.

During the first decade of the 1500s successive Spanish expeditions to mainland Central America took place. It was now generally recognised that a new continent had been discovered, separating Europe and Asia and attempts were now made to settle and exploit the mainland. In 1509 two expeditions, comprising over a thousand men set out to settle Veragua and the north coast of present day Colombia. However, the expeditions were decimated by sickness, hunger and native opposition, until reinforcements arrived to be eventually led by Vasco Nunez de Balboa, who decisively and ruthlessly usurped control. By a variety of methods, including terror and diplomacy, he achieved control over the native Indians. The Spanish themselves were forced to plant crops and build houses, the result being that the settlements lasted, for example the city of Darien in Panama. The result of his work was that the area started to become an important part of Spanish colonial trade. Another extremely important consequence was that in the failed search for a sea route through Central America to Asia, the Spanish would encounter the Aztecs, an event that would transform the principle of exploration to that of conquest.

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## The Aztec civilization

### What were the main features of the Aztec civilization?

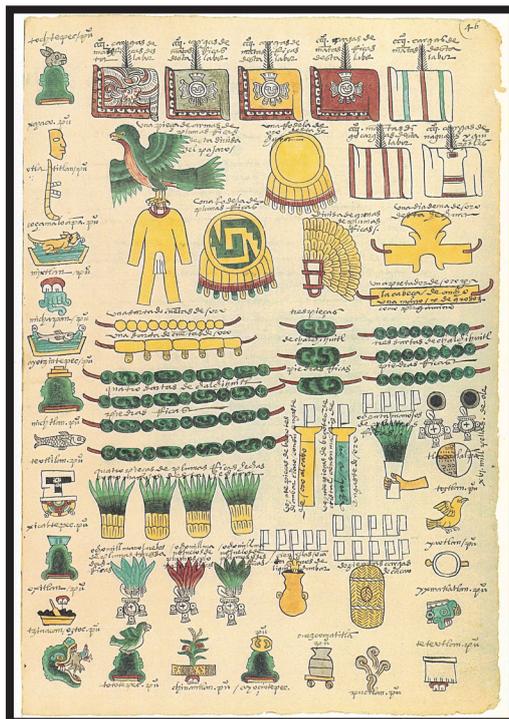
#### Methods of rule; payment of tribute

It is now widely believed that the Aztec civilization originated from an area covering present day New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and Colorado with the twelfth century being cited as the period during which they migrated south to central Mexico, becoming identified as the Mexica. During the next three centuries inter-tribal war dominated but after the end of the Tepanec War in 1428 an alliance between the forces of Texcoco, Tlacopan and Tenochtitlan (the capital of the Mexica) embarked upon territorial expansion. It was the city of Tenochtitlan that eventually came to dominate this alliance and its ruler the Huey Tlatoni, or Great Speaker, effectively became head of what was now the Aztec Empire.

Over the following decades the Aztec empire came to dominate the region through the military strength of its warriors. This became the predominant method of rule for the Aztecs and it was sustained by the forced service, or conscription, of all adult males as well as men from allies or areas that had been conquered into the Aztec military. An Aztec could become a pilli, meaning of noble class, through exploits in war and the more prisoners he captured the greater the potential was for reward or achieving a higher rank such as Eagle or Jaguar Knight. Aztec warfare mainly concentrated upon capturing the major cities of their rivals after which the entire surrounding area was claimed as theirs. The superiority and destructive power of their forces ensured that the Aztec empire effectively ruled an area of around 135,000 square kilometres.

The payment of tribute was another key feature of the Aztecs' method of rule. The diverse nature of the empire meant that no single system of government existed in practice. Tribute, a form of tax, would comprise of a variety of goods, such as food, clothing, raw materials, captives for labour and luxury goods. It was paid either quarterly or annually and was undoubtedly a financial strain on those who had to pay it. The demands were made in the form of a list which were often determined by what each area had to offer, or was rich in. Sometimes travelling merchants would provide information to Aztec officials detailing the prospects for tribute from a region. For example, evidence shows that the city of Tlaxtepec was expected to pay tribute in the form of gold and semi-precious stones, rubber, jade and cacao beans, among several other objects. Therefore the quantities of goods drawn to Tenochtitlan each year were enormous.

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**Source 7: An Aztec tribute list showing the goods that were expected to be paid**

This payment of tribute served two purposes: - it maintained the strength of the Aztec empire by increasing its wealth, depriving those conquered of theirs; it also maintained a sense of fear in subjugated peoples as the threat of punitive raids for the failure to pay tribute served to keep them in line.

## Beliefs; codices; ritual of sacrifice

Aztec beliefs were built around mythology and religion and much of them were based on a fear of nature and the end of the world. The foundation of Tenochtitlan was considered to have been the result of the people being guided there by their god Huitzilopochtli, the supreme god of sun, fire and war. Aztec gods were a mixture of those specific to the Mexica who were one of the founders of the Aztec people and older gods of Mesoamerica in general.

Aztec religion proposed that the gods took five attempts to create the world, but fighting amongst them had prevented it from taking place. Eventually the god Nanauatl became the sun but would not move. The other gods were sacrificed by Ehecatl to create a wind to move the sun but in order to keep it moving, people would have to repay the sacrifice. People had been created by Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, who had brought them to life by mixing bones with his own blood. The relationship between

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humans, the gods and nature had to be kept in balance or disaster would occur.



**Source 8: Quetzalcoatl, as depicted in the Codex Borbonicus**

The result of this interaction was that everything was strictly determined by a variety of **Aztec calendars**. Ceremonies to honour the array of gods had to take place on specific dates and these ceremonies consisted of festivals, dancing, music, the burial of precious goods and sacrifices. For example, in addition to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztecs worshipped **Tlaloc** (the rain god), **Xiuhtecuhtli** (the god of fire) and **Mictlantecuhtli** (the god of the dead). The sun also had a fifty-two year cycle and this caused much fear among the Aztecs who destroyed their belongings and went into mourning every fifty-two years to ensure its continuation.

**Prophecies** also played a major role in Aztec beliefs and partly help to explain the compliant attitude of some natives to the Spanish conqueror Hernan Cortes, who some considered to be a god. Belief in the **afterlife** was universal. Those sacrificed to Huitzilopochtli would help in the battle against darkness and it was also believed that some would be reincarnated in various forms. There were nine levels in the **underworld** and people would be buried with possessions that would help them in their journey.

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Much is known about the Aztec civilization due to the existence of **Aztec codices**. The codices are a series of books or long folded sheets that provide information about Aztec **history and culture**. There are relatively few codices that pre-date the Spanish conquest, but those that do are mainly pictorial in nature. Those produced during and after the Spanish conquest contain pictures but are also written in **Nahuatl** (the native language), Spanish and sometimes Latin. The codices served as maps, calendars, historical records and ritual texts for the Aztec people.

Several codices exist that are important sources of information. For example, the **Codex Borbonicus** is one that was written by Aztec priests during the Spanish conquest, containing information on Aztec calendars, the fifty-two year cycle of the sun and many of the ceremonies and rituals of the people. The **Codex Aubin** details the history of the Aztecs from when they first moved from their original territories through to 1607. The **Codex Magliabechiano**, created during the mid-sixteenth century, describes the religious ceremonies and beliefs of the Aztecs.



**Source 9: A page from the Codex Borbonicus**

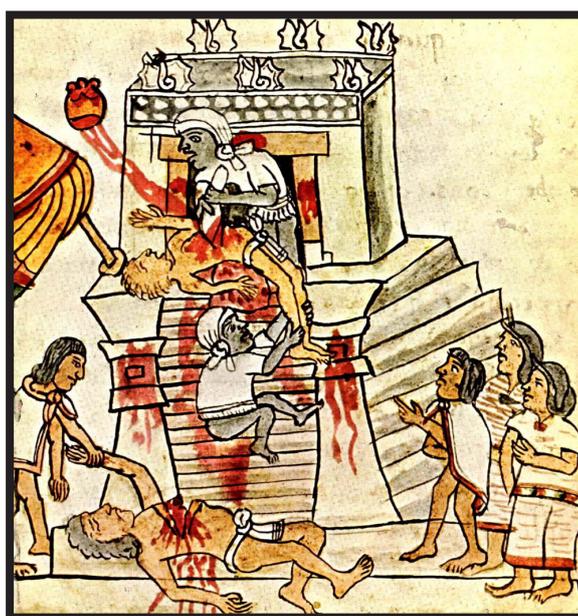
The codices also reveal the importance of the ritual of sacrifice. In the sky there was a continual battle between light and darkness and in order for the sun to win sacrifices were needed. Animals and objects were often sacrificed but the most valuable sacrifices were humans. Humans and occasionally children were sacrificed

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to ensure the gods were 'fed'. It was believed that satisfying the gods would prevent disasters such as storms, famine and drought and more importantly that the balance in nature was maintained. Human hearts and blood provided strength to the gods and appeased them. The importance of the ceremonies was reflected in the construction of large temples where the offering of sacrifices took place.

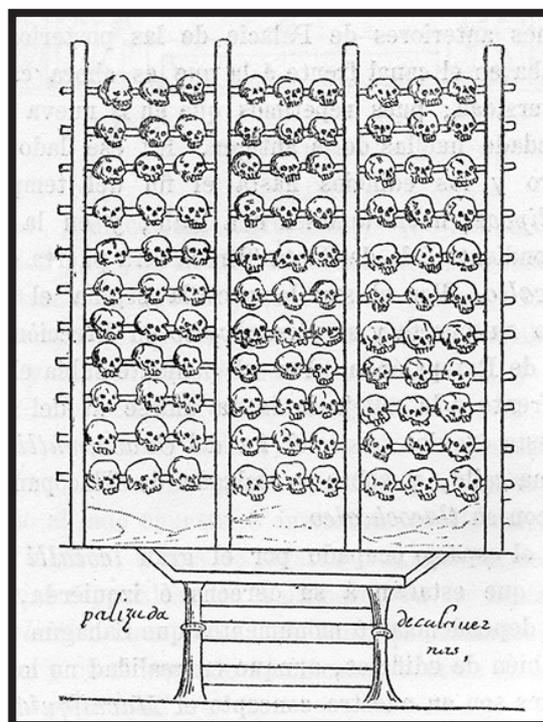
Many of the sacrificial victims were prisoners of war. This was particularly case in the so-called 'Flower wars', which were pre-planned conflicts between the Aztecs and their enemies. The battles were designed to show the military prowess of the Aztecs and it was ensured that there were equal numbers on each side. Capturing victims for human sacrifice also meant that flower wars were sometimes deliberately inconclusive, so that the supply of sacrificial victims could be maintained. Warriors who had displayed bravery in battle were considered to be the most valuable offering to the gods.

Ritual sacrifice generally involved the heart being cut out, decapitation or a one-sided battle between the victim and Aztec warriors. Victims were cut open using a ceremonial obsidian knife. The head would be cleaned and preserved on a tzompantli or skull rack, with the victim's body being either cremated or dismembered and offered as gifts. It is known that many thousands were sacrificed each year, especially at the main temple in Tenochtitlan. It is believed that other forms of human sacrifice involved torture, for example being shot at with arrows.



**Source 10: Ritual human sacrifice as shown in the Codex Magliabechiano**

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**Source 11: A tzompantli, as depicted in the Duran Codex**

It also appears to have been the case that different kinds of sacrificial victims were offered to different gods. For example, male children that were sick were sacrificed to Tlaloc and young women were drowned for the god Xilonen. Evidence also suggests that cannibalism was practised, although whether it was widespread among the Aztecs is uncertain. Both practices of sacrifice and cannibalism were forbidden by the Spanish under Cortes, but they served to increase the determination of the Spanish to impose Christianity upon the Aztec people.

### Significance of Tenochtitlan

The Aztec world, according to their religious beliefs, was divided into four quadrants with their capital Tenochtitlan at the centre. The city was situated on the western shore of Lake Texcoco and by 1500 its population was around 100,000. Three causeways connected the city to the shore of the lake and an aqueduct brought in fresh water from nearby springs. In addition to being the political and religious centre of the empire, it was exceptionally important as a trading centre with huge quantities of produce coming in and out of the city.

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The scale of the city was impressive, reflected in Spanish accounts from the period which praised its architecture. It was divided into four areas which were themselves divided into about twenty districts, each one of which had its own marketplace that was the hub of commercial life. Dominating the centre was the Templo Mayor pyramid which comprised of two twin temples, one dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and the other to Tlaloc. It was here that the majority of sacrifices were carried out. The temple was part of the Sacred Precinct, an area containing over seventy separate structures including various minor temples, a ball court and skull rack or tzompantli.

The construction and layout of the city was sophisticated for the time. It contained zoos and an aquarium and Spanish visitors marvelled at the fact that private houses had toilets. However, for all its splendour, the attraction of such wealth in the form of monuments, works of art and obviously precious stones and metals ensured the Spanish were ruthless in their looting and destruction that would follow the fall of the city in August 1521.



**Source 12: A tzompantli, as depicted in the Duran Codex**

# The Voyages of Discovery and Conquest of the Americas, 1492-1522

## Hernan Cortes

### What role did Cortes play in the conquest of the Aztecs?

#### Relations with Velazquez; mission to Mexico

Of all the explorers of this period, Hernan Cortes has perhaps been the most controversial figure of all, the conquistador who essentially caused the destruction of the Aztec Empire. Born in 1485, he sailed to Hispaniola in 1504 where he became a colonist. His lesser noble status enabled him to achieve some prominence and in the five years following 1506 he took part in the conquest of Hispaniola and Cuba for which he was rewarded with an estate of land with Indian slaves.

In 1511, Cortes' rise continued when he accompanied Diego Velazquez de Cuellar, an assistant to the Governor of Hispaniola, in an expedition to Cuba. After conquering the island, Velazquez was appointed governor with Cortes receiving an important administrative post in reward for his contribution. Cortes' ability soon earned him the position of Velazquez's secretary and in the following years he continued to extend his power and influence, attracting support from many in the colony.

However, the rise of Cortes antagonized Velazquez who nevertheless appointed Cortes leader of an expedition to the mainland in October 1518. His ability to quickly and efficiently organise a sizeable expedition greatly annoyed Velazquez. Compounding the situation was Cortes' relationship with Catalina Juarez who was Velazquez's sister-in-law. Velazquez appeared to have been unhappy at the relationship, adding to the tension between the men. Cortes eventually married Catalina, but the marriage did not lessen the differences between the two men.

In late 1518, Velazquez' jealousy led to him revoking Cortes' leadership of the expedition to the mainland. Cortes however, ignored the orders and in February 1519 set sail against the wishes of Velazquez, picking up more soldiers and equipment as he went, aided by his gift for organization and impressive rhetoric. Therefore an expedition of eleven ships and over five hundred men landed on the Yucatan Peninsula on a journey that was to transform Spain's relationship with the New World.

The Yucatan Peninsula was in Mayan territory, but was quickly claimed for Spain. It was during the conquest of the area that a figure known as La Malinche assumed considerable importance. Captured during a battle with the natives at Tabasco, she

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was a native who would become Cortes' mistress and mother of his son. Her ability to speak Nahuatl and Chontal Maya meant that through the priest Geronimo de Aguilar, who spoke Chontal Maya, Cortes was able to communicate with the Aztecs. Aware that he was on the fringes of a vast empire, Cortes met with representatives of the Aztecs and requested a meeting with the tlatoani Montezuma II.

Montezuma was unsure how to deal with the uninvited strangers, possibly due to the belief that he considered Cortes to be the god Quetzalcoatl returning to reclaim his kingdom, although this had been contested by some historians. Such a belief may have led Montezuma to send cautious but friendly messages to Cortes, trying to dissuade him from proceeding to Tenochtitlan. However, the gifts he sent including two large disks of gold and silver merely served to stimulate the greed of the Spanish. Disobeying Velazquez' orders to return, Cortes further insulted his superior by sending a ship bearing gifts straight back to King Charles in Spain. He now took the drastic action of scuttling his remaining ships to prevent any of his men from leaving. Determined to continue the mission, Cortes and his small army of around six hundred soldiers started their march to Tenochtitlan in mid-August 1519.

### Alliances with indigenous peoples; massacre at Cholula

Crossing mountain ranges the expedition first approached the borders of Tlaxcala. The Tlaxcaltecs or Tlaxcalans were part of the Nahuas people who occupied the region. This fiercely independent Indian nation had been able to partly resist the invasion of successive Aztec armies and was immediately hostile to the Spanish invaders. The Tlaxcaltecs twice surrounded the Spanish forces with overwhelming numbers but on both occasions were not just driven back but eventually routed in battle. The show of strength and military prowess by the Spanish also influenced Aztec spies into advising Montezuma to prepare a military strategy to combat the invaders.

The most important consequence of the Spanish victory was that the Tlaxcaltecs were persuaded to join the Spanish in an alliance. This greatly reinforced the Spanish and indeed the support of these warriors would prove to be a crucial factor in the eventual Spanish victory. Given the bitterness between Tlaxcala and the Aztec Empire, as well as the relative poverty of the people, their senior leaders befriended Cortes and later possibly converted to Catholicism.

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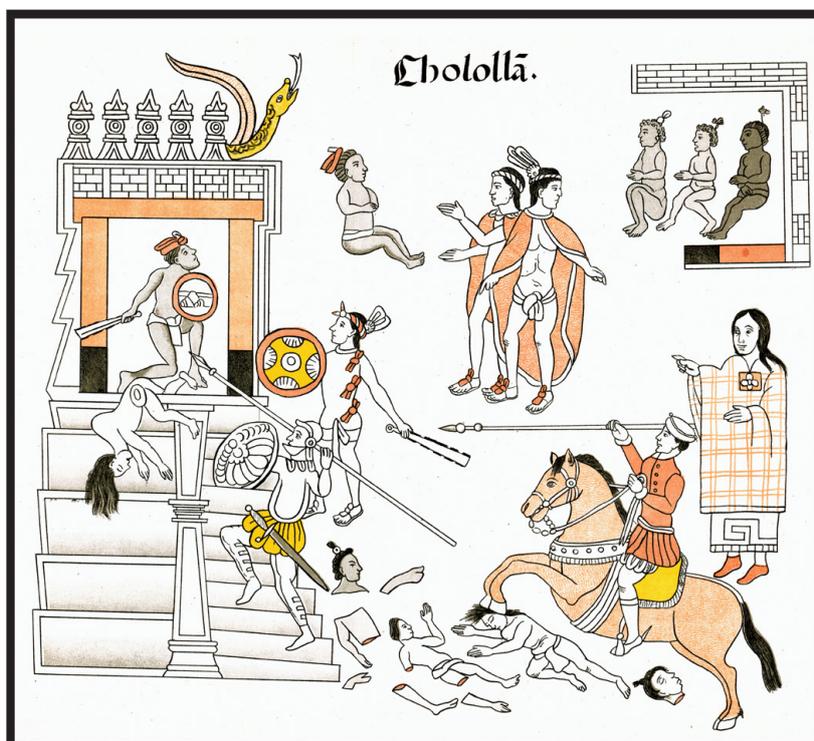
The Spanish were also fortunate to make an alliance with the Totonacs, a people who had been subject to Aztec control but who had constantly rebelled against them. The Totonac city of Cempoala had been one of the first that Cortes' expedition had come across on its way to Tenochtitlan and given their common enemy the Totonacs joined the forces with the Spanish.

The discipline, tactics and weaponry of the Spanish were also greatly superior to those of their opponents. The use of muskets, cross-bowmen, cavalry and cannon in co-ordinated fashion were far more effective than darts, arrows and slingshots. The Indians also valued individual duels in battle, seeking to capture the enemy alive whereas the Spanish simply sought to protect their companions and kill the enemy. Strengthened by the victory over the Tlaxcaltecs and the alliances forged with not only them but with the Totonacs and other Nahuas peoples, Cortes proceeded to the Aztec controlled city of Cholula.

The Cholulans were allies of the Aztecs, who may have encouraged the Spanish to go there as part of a plan to entrap them, since the Aztecs had already learnt that the Spanish could not be defeated in open battle. Weapons were stored on rooftops, ditch traps with stakes were dug in secret and a force of Aztec warriors was placed just outside the city to join in the assault on the Spaniards. However, upon entering the city the Spanish did not meet resistance, but after warnings from the Tlaxcaltecs and then La Malinche, who had spoken to one of the wives of the Cholulan lords who revealed the plan, Cortes decided to take action first.

Trapping the Cholulan chiefs in the central temple, who were forced to admit there had been a plot to attack the Spanish, Cortes ruthlessly ordered his troops and the Tlaxcaltecs to put the nobility to death. The result was the massacre of Cholula and even though estimates of the numbers killed vary widely, there seems little doubt that the deaths ran into the thousands. Parts of the city were also destroyed in an uncompromising show of brute force. Interpretations of the massacre differ, but either way the effects were the same. Other cities hearing of the incident considered it prudent to comply with the Spanish, while Montezuma was forced to concede that he would have to peacefully accept the Spanish into the capital Tenochtitlan. On November 8th 1519 the Spanish entered the city.

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**Source 13: The massacre at Cholula from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala codex, produced in the 1580s**

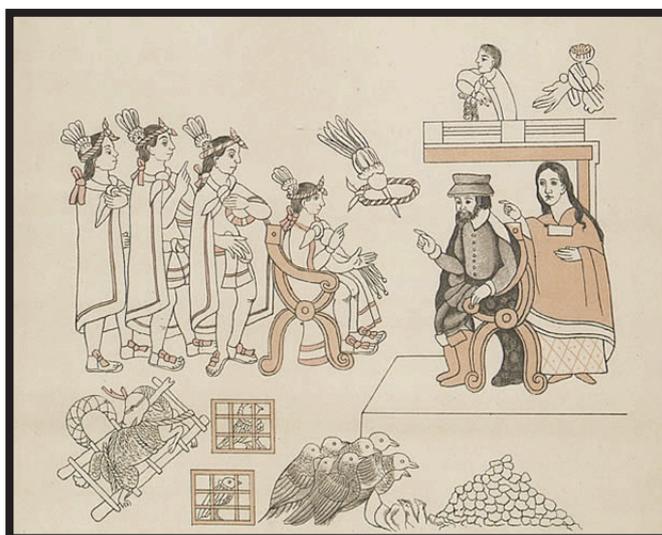
# The Voyages of Discovery and Conquest of the Americas, 1492-1522

## Defeat of the Aztecs

### How did the Spanish forces conquer the Aztec empire?

#### Ransom of Montezuma; expulsion of the Spanish

Cortes' expedition entered the city watched by thousands of onlookers. The Spanish contingent was followed by approximately three thousand Tlaxcaltecs, entering the heart of a city that had been their principal enemy for decades. Montezuma came out to meet Cortes carried by four nobles, bestowing on him necklace of golden crabs. In return Montezuma was presented with a necklace of Venetian glass beads. The formalities were followed by the housing of the Spanish and their allies in the old palace of Axayacatl and the following days were taken up with the Spanish being shown the sights of the capital. The spectacle presumably gave the Spaniards the impression that the city and therefore the Aztecs could not be overcome, but their dealings with Montezuma would present them with opportunities that would precipitate the fall of the empire.



**Source 14: Montezuma meeting Cortes and his interpreter La Malinche, November 1519**

After about two weeks as guests of Montezuma, the Spanish began to consider methods by which they could advance their cause. The Spanish had already discovered much of the great wealth possessed by Montezuma, which further stimulated their plans. Responding to reports that the Aztecs had killed some Spanish on the coast at Veracruz, Cortes requested an audience with Montezuma during which they seized

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him. The ransom of Montezuma as an insurance against Aztec attack was a bold move by Cortes but was one that put him in control of the situation. Despite trying to cover his humiliation by saying he was going as a guest of the Spanish, Montezuma had lost the initiative and as a result the unrest in the city began to grow.

By early 1520 Montezuma declared his allegiance to King Charles and gave a hoard of treasure to Cortes' soldiers. The population of Tenochtitlan were further angered when a crucifix was placed on the Great Pyramid and a mass took place at the summit. Some of Montezuma's chieftains now decided to take action to get rid of the Spanish and Cortes was informed that their safety could no longer be guaranteed. At this crucial point Cortes received news that his old adversary Velazquez had sent a military expedition under Panfilo de Narvaez to arrest Cortes and take charge of the expedition. Cortes was now forced to leave Tenochtitlan, allowing two hundred men to remain in the capital to protect Spanish interests and took the remainder of his forces to confront Narvaez.

Cortes' march through the mountains surprised Narvaez who was captured in a skirmish. Cortes, as ever the persuasive orator, persuaded Narvaez' troops to join him, but the situation in Tenochtitlan had deteriorated greatly due to the actions of Cortes' lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado. During an Aztec festival in honour of one of their gods, Alvarado had launched an unprovoked attack on the participants, killing men, women and children in an incident that became known as the Massacre in the Great Temple. It was in the immediate aftermath of this that Cortes and his force returned to the capital.

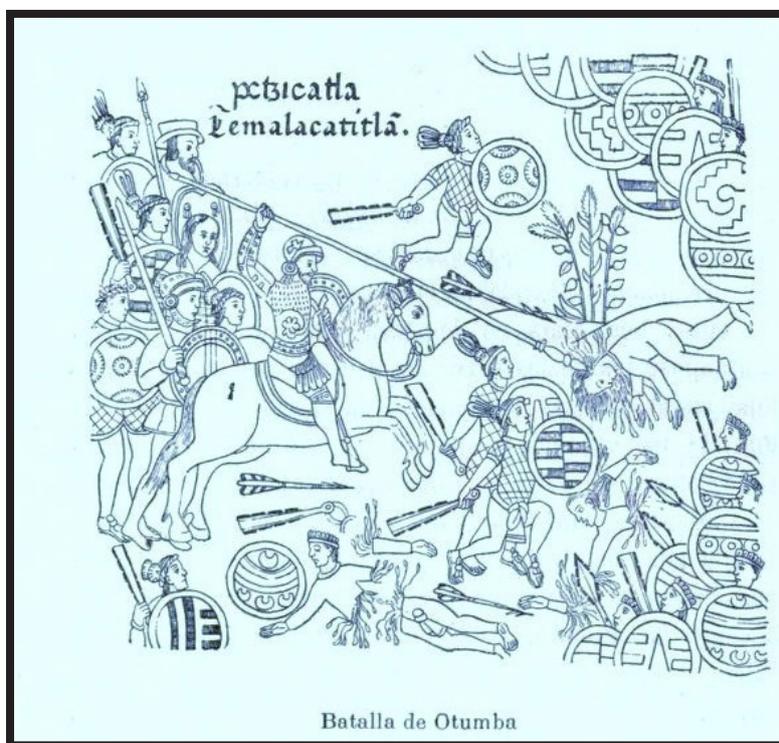
The response was predictable with suppressed hatred for the Spanish invaders now bursting forth. Aztec warriors attacked the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans and the Aztec nobility now chose Montezuma's brother Cuitlahuac to replace him. Montezuma was ordered by Cortes to speak to his people, but their response was a mixture of derision and then anger. A hail of stones and arrows followed during which Montezuma was mortally wounded, dying shortly afterwards.

Cortes now went on the offensive and his forces stormed the Templo Mayor. However, despite this success Cortes now realised that the position of his forces was untenable and decided to escape from the city under the cover of darkness. During the night the Spanish secretly tried to repair gaps in the causeway and then slip away. Their presence was discovered and the ensuing battle was a disaster for the Spanish with many troops either killed by the Aztecs or drowned in the lake under the weight of

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booty stolen from the city. Much of the treasure stolen was thus lost and the battle would become known by the Spanish as La Noche Triste, or The Night of Sorrows.

The Spanish and their allies now made their way to Tlaxcalan territory, but faced one more battle at Otumba. Despite facing overwhelming numbers, the Spanish were able to hold off the Aztecs and eventually a cavalry charge led by Cortes killed one of the Aztec leaders, after which the remaining Aztec forces withdrew. The series of events that resulted in the expulsion of the Spanish from Tenochtitlan cost the lives of over nine hundred Spanish members of Cortes' party and many more of his allies. Sanctuary was now found in Tlaxcala and the next moves were planned.



**Source 15: The Battle of Otumba, from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala Codex**

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### Siege of Tenochtitlan; defeat of the Aztecs; establishment of Mexico City

The expulsion of the Spanish from Tenochtitlan however, only served to reinforce the drive of Cortes and his remaining forces to complete the conquest of the Aztecs. The following months were spent in Tlaxcalan territory, recuperating and planning the final assault on the Aztec capital. Reinforcements arriving from Cuba strengthened Cortes' position in terms of manpower and supplies. Cortes also sought to strengthen a variety of alliances with those tribes who were keen to be rid of Aztec domination. In Tenochtitlan itself the city was ravaged by smallpox which further pushed the balance of power towards the invaders.

During April 1521 Cortes' forces, comprising of the Spanish and their native allies, made their way to the Valley of Mexico with the aim of besieging and capturing Tenochtitlan. In determining how to capture the city, Cortes had decided to undertake a blockade by using ships, or brigantines. The cause was further helped by the switching of allegiance to the Spanish of the city of Texcoco, a previous ally of the Aztecs. The result was that Tenochtitlan was slowly isolated with towns and villages in the surrounding area taken piecemeal by the Spanish and their allies.

By early summer the Spanish and their allies had control of the three causeways that led to the city and commenced their attack. There now followed weeks of fierce fighting as the course of the battle swung to and fro between the competing forces. Gains made one day were lost the next with the Spanish finding it hard to advance along the causeways harassed by huge numbers of Aztecs in canoes. The attrition continued with supplies of food and water to the city being cut causing widespread starvation. Massacres took place as Indian allies of the Spanish took revenge upon their former oppressors by slaughtering all they could find. Many Spanish troops were captured then executed or sacrificed by the Aztecs led by Guatemoc. However, the Spanish tactics eventually began to prevail as they slowly pushed closer and closer to the centre of Tenochtitlan, through the rubble of buildings and the masses of dead bodies.

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**Source 16: The fall of Tenochtitlan by an unknown 17th century artist**

The Aztec situation was now desperate, their losses accumulating daily, their dearth of supplies worsening and starvation and disease rampant. However, their forces refused to surrender and death was viewed as being preferable. The Templo Mayor and royal palaces were captured as the remaining Aztec forces retreated into the district of Tlatelolco, an ally of the Aztecs. Still the fierce fighting continued with many thousands killed, including seventy Spanish prisoners of war who had their hearts cut out as a desperate offering to the gods. Eventually the Spanish forces converged upon the area and now seeing that the situation was hopeless, Guatemoc attempted to flee with his wife and remaining chieftains, but was captured in the process. He was taken to Cortes where his surrender was accepted.

The Aztec forces were now destroyed and total capitulation took place with the battle ending on 13th August 1521. Despite the magnanimous way in which Guatemoc had been initially treated, he was subsequently tortured by Cortes by having his feet burned with oil in order to reveal the whereabouts of the gold and jewels of the city. The remaining Aztecs fled as an orgy of murder, looting and rape engulfed the city. Aztec losses through all causes were possibly in excess of 100,000 and Cortes now reigned supreme, personally ruling Mexico from 1521 to 1524, including rule over those allies whose value to him had been so great that the war would not have been won without them.

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The imposition of Spanish rule now began in earnest. The city itself was in ruins with disease and starvation rife. What was left of the city was now directed to be destroyed by Cortes with the centre to be rebuilt as an area to be used by the Spanish administration. Remnants of the Aztec civilization were destroyed, although the basic layout of Tenochtitlan remained intact. The Templo Mayor was taken down and used to build a cathedral. Spanish colonial buildings were also constructed on its former site.

The reconstruction took place over many years, with huge amounts of native labour employed to undertake the work. The causeways were rebuilt, with Spanish living in the centre which was built in a grid pattern. Indians lived in the outer districts that were built in a more random fashion. Over the following years the city state would re-emerge, renamed as Mexico City, which became the new capital of New Spain. The fall of Tenochtitlan marked the end of a great Indian civilization but the effects of the Aztec demise were to be widespread and of great importance to not just the Americas but to Europe as well.

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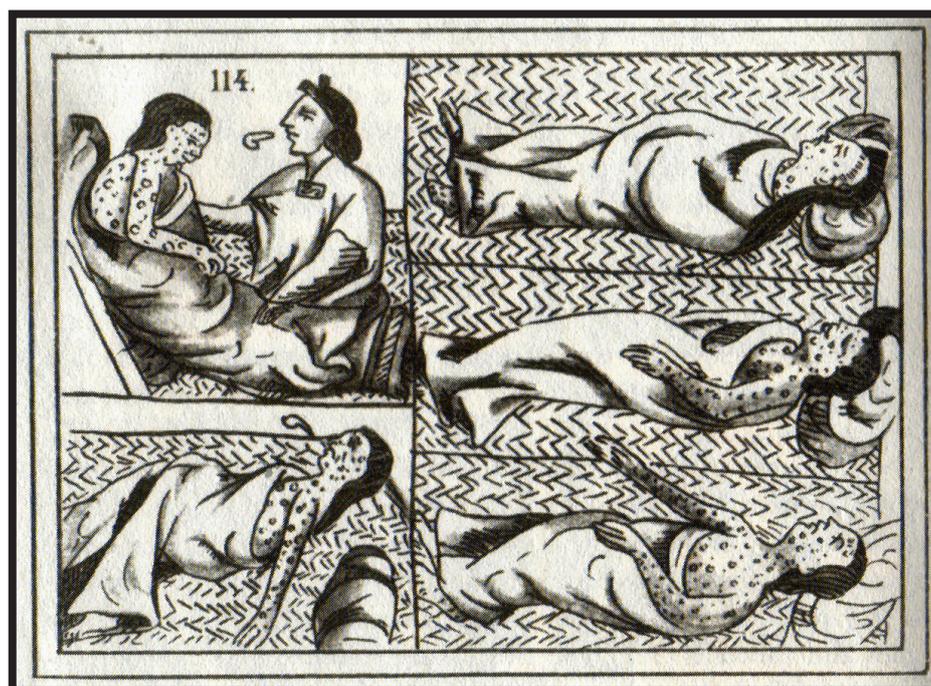
## Effects of the Spanish Conquest

### What was the impact of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs?

#### Impact of disease; treatment of the natives

There can be no doubt whatsoever that the arrival of the Spanish had an enormously profound impact on the indigenous people of the New World. Militarily and politically, the effects were the destruction of the Aztec Empire and the imposition of Spanish colonial rule. The social changes were of course also of immense significance. The influx of Spaniards into the New World obviously led to the creation of people with both Spanish and indigenous American blood. However, the biggest impact was the importing of European diseases to which the natives had no resistance. The effects of this were devastating.

The diseases imported included influenza, typhus, measles and smallpox. Europeans had over the centuries developed a certain amount of immunity, but with no immunity at all the Indians of the Americas immediately began to suffer after coming into contact with the diseases. Of all the diseases, smallpox had the most devastating effects. Although it is unknown as to when it arrived in Central America, it was certainly the case that one of Narvaez's forces was afflicted by the disease and from 1520 on, after a slow start, it spread rapidly through the region.



**Source 17: A 16th century drawing of Aztec smallpox victims**

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The disease did not of course discriminate and several Indian leaders perished during the epidemic that followed. This epidemic had ruinous effects upon the population. Some rough estimates put the number of deaths over a fifty year period following the Spanish invasion at over forty-five million. The numbers killed weakened the ability of the indigenous people to resist the Spanish, with coastal regions particularly badly affected. The depopulation led to a severely diminished labour force, to which the Spanish reacted by seeking to import slave labour, further changing the face of the region.

Despite making alliances with some of the indigenous tribes, offering privileges and rewards as a means of gathering support, the Spanish treatment of the natives was undoubtedly poor. The military campaign was a brutal one, based upon ruthless suppression of opposition and an equally ruthless seizure of the spoils. Examples of massacres are documented by Aztec and Spanish sources, with the Cholula massacre a prominent example. After the military conquests were complete, the subjugation of the natives was continued by the imposition of the encomienda system, where Spanish settlers were given their own communities of native labour. This was essentially forced labour that was a form of tribute and although not slavery in its strictest sense, was as restrictive and punitive, with the overall treatment of labourers by the Spanish being very poor.

### Imposition of Christianity; cultural impact

A strong driving force behind the voyages of discovery and this period of exploration had of course been religion. Therefore a major consequence of the Spanish expansion in the New World was the Christianisation of the native population. In this sense the conquest was religious as well as military. Alongside the conquistadores were sent missionary priests to convert the native population to Catholicism, which the Papacy was naturally supportive of. Of particular importance was the work of the religious orders, such as the Dominican and Franciscan monks as well as Jesuit priests.

The importance of the missionaries was reflected in the fact that they were granted considerable powers and were in many ways representative of Spanish authority. The preaching of the Catholic faith was also of course intended to wipe out the system of pagan beliefs that were widespread amongst the natives. Most significantly of course was the ending of the Aztec practice of human sacrifice and other rituals that involved torture or mutilation. The imposition of Christianity thus resulted in an enormous amount of upheaval for the population of the New World. Churches

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were built, many in places that had been viewed as sacred sites for pagan gods. Tenochtitlan for example, witnessed the destruction of the Templo Mayor and its replacement with a cathedral built from the stones of the destroyed temple to the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli. Whilst many adopted the new Catholic faith, attachment to old gods remained and lingered for many years. Overall though, the Christianisation of the region was perhaps the longest lasting legacy of the Spanish conquest.

The conquest naturally had an important cultural impact on all sets of peoples involved and was partly a result of the imposition of Catholicism. The indigenous people now had to assimilate into the way of life of their colonisers, but the process was relatively slow. The erasing of the Aztec culture was however a major consequence, reflected in the first instance by the almost complete destruction of the capital city Tenochtitlan. Aztecs who survived the conquest and the epidemics that followed were prevented from learning aspects of their culture and were essentially forced to read and write in Spanish. The consequence was that many elements of Aztec culture were lost forever and the Spanish language came to dominate the region, helped for example by the publication of a Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary in 1571. Spanish laws soon replaced practices that had been passed down through generations.

Colonisation increased the pull to the major cities of the new Spanish Empire, partly through natives trying to avoid the subjugation of the *encomienda*. It was therefore in the cities that the cultural changes were the greatest. An example can be seen in their architecture, with the cities being laid out in the same way – square blocks and ordered streets. The Aztec education system, such as there was one, was abolished and replaced by a basic Catholic Church education and some foods were prohibited due to their links to Aztec religious practices.

### Increase in trade; wealth; European inflation

Although the desire to spread Christianity had been an important stimulus for the Voyages of Discovery, the need to **increase trade** and find new routes to the East had dominated the commercial considerations of explorers and monarchs. The ‘discovery’ of the New World opened up enormous commercial opportunities for principally Spain and Portugal and the result was that valuable **mineral resources** and **agricultural products** were now brought to Europe via trade routes that soon became well established. The introduction of **new products** such as chocolate, corn, tomatoes, potatoes and tobacco had important consequences for not just

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the economies of Europe, but also for the way in which Europeans lived their lives. Products from Europe such as textiles, tools, weapons, paper were shipped to the New World thus creating a stimulus for European economies, especially that of Spain.

However, there can no doubt that the New World was thoroughly **exploited** by the Spanish, in terms of **mineral wealth, land and Indian labour**. The **encomienda** system resulted in almost slave like conditions for the natives, who were paid extremely low wages – if they were paid at all. Exploitation of land and minerals became the norm. **Gold** and other precious jewels stolen from the Aztecs were shipped back to Spain in vast quantities and displayed as trophies to stimulate further colonization. The mid-1550s on would see the development of the Spanish **Treasure Fleet**, a convoy system aimed at reducing the increasing threat from piracy. Natives were expected to find their own quota of gold and were punished for not doing so. The result was that the New World became a cash cow for the Spanish and the proceeds were used to fund the Empire's many military commitments.



**Source 18: Spanish (white) and Portuguese (blue) trade routes following the Voyages of Discovery**

The amount of gold and then silver that was stolen or cheaply mined, then brought to Europe following the conquest of Aztecs and other indigenous tribes had another important consequence for European economies – inflation. Gold and silver artefacts were often melted down and recast as coinage which then entered the European market. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries there had been a shortage of precious metals, but this was now transformed into an abundance being available. The result was a decrease in the value of these precious metals which in turn caused prices to rise. Spain failed to control the amount of gold and silver being brought in and the effects of inflation were most keenly felt amongst the poorer sections

## The Voyages of Discovery and Conquest of the Americas, 1492-1522

of the population who now found that money would not buy as much as before.

The effects were not just felt in Spain, the most significant colonial power of the period. Across Western Europe during the 15th century, inflation increased and by 1600 prices were three to four times higher than in 1500. Increasing prices also had a negative impact on Spanish exports since expensive goods could not compete with cheaper products from other countries in international markets. The combination of rising prices, a failure to control the money supply and heavy military expenditure led to the Spanish monarchy being bankrupted three times during the century.

The consequences of the expansion of the Spanish Empire during this period were therefore widespread and profound. The discoveries would bring about the triangular slave trade with all the long-term effects that would have on Africa, North and Central America. The wide array of consequences would change the face and nature of Europe and the New World and in every conceivable sense, saw the end of the medieval period and the start of the early-modern world.

## Acknowledgements

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