

Christ, into the world to save humanity from its sins. The Christian Church devised a religious calendar that transformed animist festivals into holy days. The winter solstice, which had for millennia marked the return of the sun, became the feast of Christmas.

The Church also taught that Satan, a wicked supernatural being, was constantly challenging God by tempting people to sin. People who spread **heresies**—doctrines that were inconsistent with the teachings of the Church—were seen as the tools of Satan, and suppressing false doctrines became an obligation of Christian rulers.

The Crusades In their work suppressing false doctrines, Christian rulers were also obliged to combat **Islam**, the religion whose followers considered Muhammad to be God's last prophet. Islam's reach expanded until it threatened European Christendom. Following the death of Muhammad in A.D. 632, the newly converted Arab peoples of North Africa used force and fervor to spread the Muslim faith into sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Indonesia, as well as deep into Spain and the Balkan regions of Europe. Between A.D. 1096 and 1291, Christian armies undertook a series of **Crusades** to reverse the Muslim advance in Europe and win back the holy lands where Christ had lived. Under the banner of the pope and led by Europe's Christian monarchs, crusading armies aroused great waves of popular piety as they marched off to combat. New orders of knights, like the Knights Templar and the Teutonic Knights, were created to support them.

The crusaders had some military successes, but their most profound impact was on European society. Religious warfare intensified Europe's Christian identity and prompted the persecution of Jews and their expulsion from many European countries. The Crusades also introduced Western European merchants to the trade routes that stretched from Constantinople to China along the Silk Road and from the Mediterranean Sea through the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean. And crusaders encountered sugar for the first time. Returning soldiers brought it back from the Middle East, and as Europeans began to conquer territory in the eastern Mediterranean, they experimented with raising it themselves. These early experiments with

sugar would have a profound impact on European enterprise in the Americas—and European involvement with the African slave trade—in the centuries to come. By 1450, Western Europe remained relatively isolated from

the centers of civilization in Eurasia and Africa, but the Crusades and the rise of Italian merchant houses had introduced it to a wider world.

The Reformation In 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk and professor at the university in Wittenberg, took up the cause of reform in the Catholic Church. Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* condemned the Church for many corrupt practices. More radically, Luther downplayed the role of the clergy as mediators between God and believers and said that Christians must look to the Bible, not to the Church, as the ultimate authority in matters of faith. So that every literate German could read the Bible, previously available only in Latin, Luther translated it into German.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, Switzerland, French theologian John Calvin established a rigorous Protestant regime. Even more than Luther, Calvin stressed human weakness and God's omnipotence. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) depicted God as an absolute sovereign. Calvin preached the doctrine of **predestination**, the idea that God chooses certain people for salvation before they are born and condemns the rest to eternal damnation. In Geneva, he set up a model Christian community and placed spiritual authority in ministers who ruled the city, prohibiting frivolity and luxury. "We know," wrote Calvin, "that man is of so perverse and crooked a nature, that everyone would scratch out his neighbor's eyes if there were no bridle to hold them in." Calvin's authoritarian doctrine won converts all over Europe, including the Puritans in Scotland and England.

Luther's criticisms triggered a war between the Holy Roman Empire and the northern principalities in Germany, and soon the controversy between the Roman Catholic Church and radical reformers like Luther and Calvin spread throughout much of Western Europe. The **Protestant Reformation**, as this movement came to be called, triggered a **Counter-Reformation** in the Catholic Church that sought change from within and created new monastic and missionary orders, including the Jesuits (founded in 1540), who saw themselves as soldiers of Christ. The competition between these divergent Christian traditions did much to shape European colonization of the Americas. Roman Catholic powers—Spain, Portugal, and France—sought to win souls in the Americas for the Church, while Protestant nations—England and the Netherlands—viewed the Catholic Church as corrupt and exploitative and hoped instead to create godly communities attuned to the true gospel of Christianity.

TRACE CHANGE OVER TIME

How did the growing influence of the Christian Church affect events in Europe?

West and Central Africa: Origins of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Homo sapiens originated in Africa. Numerous civilizations had already risen and fallen there, and contacts with the Near East and the Mediterranean were millennia old, when Western Europeans began sailing down its Atlantic coast. Home to perhaps 100 million in 1400, Africa was divided by the vast expanse of the Sahara. North Africa bordered on the Mediterranean, and its peoples fell under the domination of Christian Byzantium until the seventh century, when Muslim conquests brought the region under Islamic influence. In its coastal seaports, the merchandise of Asia, the Near East, Africa, and Europe converged. South of the Sahara, by contrast, the societies of West and Central Africa bordering on the Atlantic were relatively isolated. After 1400, that would quickly change.

Empires, Kingdoms, and Ministates

West Africa—the part of the continent that bulges into the Atlantic—can be visualized as a broad horizontal swath divided into three climatic zones. The Sahel is the mostly flat, semiarid zone immediately south of the Sahara. Below it lies the savanna, a grassland region dotted with trees and shrubs. South of the savanna, in a band 200 to 300 miles wide along the West African coast, lies a tropical rain forest. A series of four major watersheds—the Senegal, Gambia, Volta, and Niger—dominate West Africa (Map 1.3).

Sudanic civilization took root at the eastern end of West Africa beginning around 9000 B.C. and traveled westward. Sudanic peoples domesticated cattle (8500–7500 B.C.) and cultivated sorghum and millet (7500–7000 B.C.). Over several thousand years, these peoples developed a distinctive style of pottery, began to cultivate and weave cotton (6500–3500 B.C.), and invented techniques for working copper and iron (2500–1000 B.C.). Sudanic civilization had its own tradition of monotheism distinct from that of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Most Sudanic peoples in West Africa lived in stratified states ruled by kings and princes who were regarded as divine.

From these cultural origins, three great empires arose in succession in the northern savanna. The first, the Ghana Empire, appeared sometime around A.D. 800. Ghana capitalized on the recently domesticated camel to pioneer trade routes across the Sahara to

North Africa, where Ghana traders carried the wealth of West Africa. The Ghana Empire gave way to the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century, which was eclipsed in turn by the Songhai Empire in the fifteenth century. All three empires were composed of smaller vassal kingdoms, not unlike the Aztec and Inca empires, and relied on military might to control their valuable trade routes.

Gold, abundant in West Africa, was the cornerstone of power and an indispensable medium of international trade. By 1450, West African traders had carried so much of it across the Sahara that it constituted one-half to two-thirds of all the gold in circulation in Europe, North Africa, and Asia. Mansa Musa, the tenth emperor of Mali, was a devout Muslim famed for his construction projects and his support of mosques and schools. In 1326, he embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca with a vast retinue that crossed the Sahara and passed through Egypt. They spent so much gold along the way that the region's money supply was devalued for more than a decade after their visit.

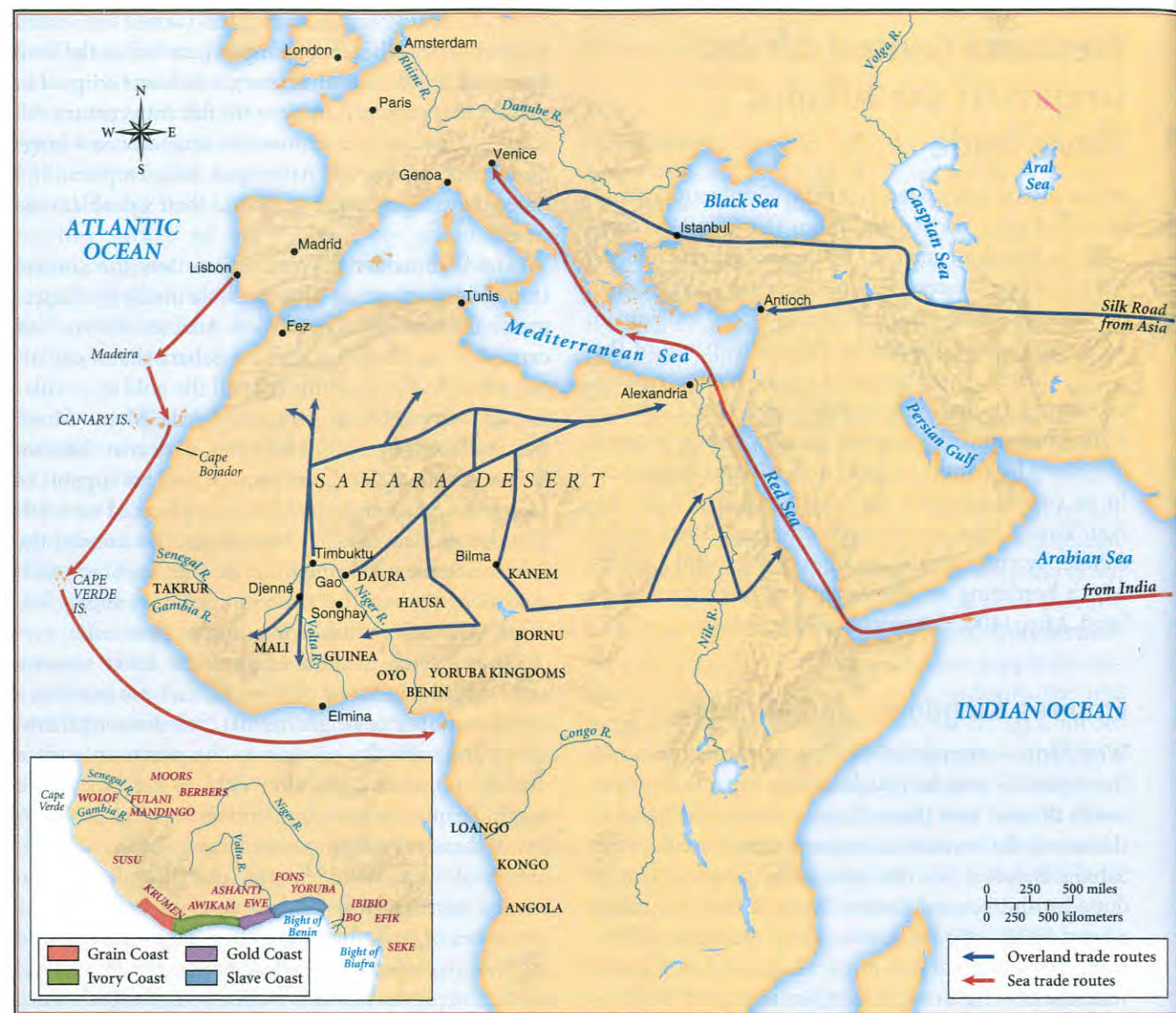
To the south of these empires, the lower savanna and tropical rain forest of West Africa were home to a complex mosaic of kingdoms that traded among themselves and with the empires to the north. In such a densely populated, resource-rich region, they also fought frequently in a competition for local power. A few of these coastal kingdoms were quite large in size, but most were small enough that they have been termed ministates by historians. Comparable to the city-states of Italy, they were often about the size of a modern-day county in the United States. The tropical ecosystem prevented them from raising livestock, since the tsetse fly (which carries a parasite deadly to livestock) was endemic to the region, as was malaria. In place of the grain crops of the savanna, these peoples pioneered the cultivation of yams; they also gathered resources from the rivers and seacoast.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

How do the states of the savanna compare to those of the Americas and Europe?

Trans-Saharan and Coastal Trade

For centuries, the primary avenue of trade for West Africans passed through the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires, whose power was based on the monopoly they enjoyed over the **trans-Saharan trade**. Their caravans carried West African goods—including gold, copper, salt, and slaves—from the south to the north across the Sahara, then returned with textiles and other foreign goods. For the smaller states clustered



MAP 1.3
West Africa and the Mediterranean in the Fifteenth Century

Trade routes across the Sahara had long connected West Africa with the Mediterranean region. Gold, ivory, and slaves moved north and east; fine textiles, spices, and the Muslim faith traveled south. Beginning in the 1430s, the Portuguese opened up maritime trade with the coastal regions of West Africa, which were home to many peoples and dozens of large and small states. Over the next century, the movement of gold and slaves into the Atlantic would surpass that across the Sahara.

along the West African coast, merchandise originating in the world beyond the Sahara was scarce and expensive, while markets for their own products were limited.

Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, a newly opening coastal trade with Europeans offered many West African peoples a welcome alternative. As European sailors made their way along the coast of West and then Central Africa, they encountered a bewilderingly complicated political landscape. Around

the mouths of the Senegal and Gambia rivers, numerous Mande-speaking states controlled access to the trade routes into the interior. Proceeding farther along the coast, they encountered the Akan states, a region of several dozen independent but culturally linked peoples. The Akan states had goldfields of their own, and this region soon became known to Europeans as the Gold Coast. East of the Akan states lay the Bight of Benin, which became an early center of the slave trade and thus came to be called the Slave Coast. Bending



Terracotta Figure from Mali

Dating to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, this terracotta figure came from an archaeological site near Djenna. The rider wears a large, ornate necklace, while the horse has a decorative covering on its head. The Mali Empire relied on a large cavalry to expand and defend its borders, and the horse was an important symbol of Mali's wealth and power. Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.

south, fifteenth-century sailors encountered the Kingdom of Kongo in Central Africa, the largest state on the Atlantic seaboard, with a coastline that ran for some 250 miles. It was here in 1578 that Duarte Lopez visited the capital city of more than 100,000 residents. Wherever they went ashore along this route, European traders had to negotiate contacts on local terms (Thinking Like a Historian, p. 26).

The Spirit World

Some West Africans who lived immediately south of the Sahara—the Fulanis in Senegal, the Mande-speakers in Mali, and the Hausas in northern Nigeria—learned about Islam from Arab merchants and Muslim leaders called imams. Converts to Islam knew the Koran and worshipped only a single God. Some of their cities, like Timbuktu, the legendary commercial center on the Niger River, became centers of Islamic learning and instruction. But most West

Africans acknowledged multiple gods, as well as spirits that lived in the earth, animals, and plants.

Like animists in the Americas and Europe, African communities had wise men and women adept at manipulating these forces for good or ill. The Sudanic tradition of divine kingship persisted, and many people believed that their kings could contact the spirit world. West Africans treated their ancestors with great respect, believing that the dead resided in a nearby spiritual realm and interceded in their lives. Most West African peoples had secret societies, such as the Poro for men and the Sande for women, that united people from different lineages and clans. These societies conducted rituals that celebrated male virility and female fertility. “Without children you are naked,” said a Yoruba proverb. Happy was the man with a big household, many wives, many children, and many relatives—and, in a not very different vein, many slaves.

PLACE EVENTS IN CONTEXT

Why were West African leaders eager to engage in trade with Europeans?

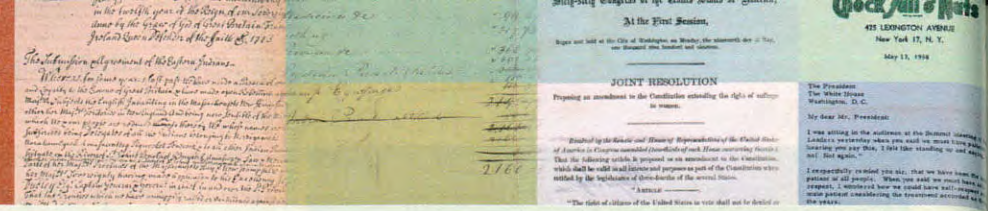
Exploration and Conquest

European engagement with the wider Atlantic world began around 1400, when the Portuguese monarchy propelled Europe into overseas expansion. Portugal soon took a leading role in the African slave trade, while the newly unified kingdom of Spain undertook Europe's first conquests in the Americas. These two ventures, though not initially linked, eventually became cornerstones in the creation of the “Atlantic World.”

Portuguese Expansion

As a young soldier fighting North African Moors with the Crusading Order of Christ, Prince Henry of Portugal (1394–1460) learned of Arab merchants' rich trade in gold and slaves across the Sahara. Seeking a maritime route to the source of this trade in West Africa, Henry founded a center for oceanic navigation. Henry's mariners, challenged to find a way through the treacherous waters off the northwest African coast, designed a better-handling vessel, the caravel, rigged with a lateen (triangular) sail that enabled the ship to tack into the wind. This innovation allowed them to sail far into the Atlantic, where they discovered and colonized the Madeira and Azore islands. From there, they sailed in 1435 to sub-Saharan Sierra Leone, where they exchanged salt, wine, and fish for African ivory and gold.

THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN



Colliding Cultures

Carefully consider each of the objects or texts below. What meanings might you—thinking like a historian—impart to them?

1. Mississippian warrior gorget (neck guard), A.D. 1250–1350.



Source: The National Museum of the American Indian/George Gustav Heye Center/New York, NY William E. Meyer Collection 15/853.

2. Portuguese officer's account of de Soto's expedition, 1557. This excerpt describes Indian resistance in the face of de Soto's campaign of conquest against Indians in the southeastern United States.

[Spanish soldiers] went over a swampy land where the horsemen could not go. A half league from camp they came upon some Indian huts near the river; [but] the people who were inside them plunged into the river. They captured four Indian women, and twenty Indians came at us and attacked us so stoutly that we had to retreat to the camp, because of their being (as they are) so skillful with their weapons. Those people are so warlike and so quick that they make no account of foot soldiers; for if these go for them, they flee, and when their adversaries turn their backs they are immediately on them. The farthest they flee is the distance of an arrow shot. They are never quiet but always running and crossing from one side to another so that the crossbows or the arquebuses can not be aimed at them; and before a crossbowman can fire a shot, an Indian can shoot three or four arrows, and very seldom

does he miss what he shoots at. If the arrow does not find armor, it penetrates as deeply as a crossbow. The bows are very long and the arrows are made of certain reeds like canes, very heavy and so tough that a sharpened cane passes through a shield. Some are pointed with a fish bone, as sharp as an awl, and others with a certain stone like a diamond point.

3. Duarte Lopez, *A Report on the Kingdom of Kongo, 1591*. A Portuguese explorer's account of his travels in southern Africa in the sixteenth century.

[T]he Kingdom of Sofala lies between the two rivers, Magnice and Cuama, on the sea-coast. It is small in size, and has but few villages and towns. . . . It is peopled by Mohammedans, and the king himself belongs to the same sect. He pays allegiance to the crown of Portugal, in order not to be subject to the government of Monomotapa [Mutapa]. On this account the Portuguese have a fortress at the mouth of the River Cuama, trading with those countries in gold, amber, and ivory, all found on that coast, as well as in slaves, and giving in exchange silk stuffs and taffetas. . . . It is said, that from these regions the gold was brought by sea which served for Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, a fact by no means improbable, for in these countries of Monomotapa are found several ancient buildings of stone, brick, and wood, and of such wonderful workmanship, and architecture, as is nowhere seen in the surrounding provinces.

The Kingdom of Monomotapa is extensive, and has a large population of Pagan heathens, who are black, of middle stature, swift of foot, and in battle fight with great bravery, their weapons being bows and arrows, and light darts. There are numerous kings tributary to Monomotapa, who constantly rebel and wage war against it. The Emperor maintains large armies, which in the provinces are divided into legions, after the manner of the Romans, for, being a great ruler, he must be at constant warfare in order to maintain his dominion. Amongst his warriors, those most renowned for bravery, are the female legions, greatly valued by the Emperor, being the sinews of his military strength.

4. Benin figurine of a Portuguese soldier from the seventeenth century. This brass figure would have been kept on an altar or on the roof of the royal palace of Benin.



Source: © The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

5. Sixteenth-century Portuguese coin made from African gold. Before the discovery of the Americas, half of the Old World's gold came from sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: © The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

6. Sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Spanish silver real. Spain minted enormous quantities of American silver; much of it was shipped to Manila, where it was exchanged for Asian luxury goods.



Source: © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

Sources: (2) John E. Worth, "Account of the Northern Conquest and Discovery of Hernando de Soto by Rodrigo Rangel," trans. John E. Worth, in Lawrence A. Clayton et al., eds., *The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539–1543* (University of Alabama Press, 1993), 59; (3) Filippo Pigafetta, *A Report of the Kingdom of Congo*, trans. Margarite Hutchinson (London: John Murray, 1881), 117–119.

ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

1. What can you infer about cultural values among Mississippian peoples from source 1? About the cultural values of the Spanish and Portuguese from sources 5 and 6? What *can't* you infer from these objects?
2. How does de Soto describe the native peoples he encounters in Florida (source 2)? How does that compare to the traits of the African kingdoms that Lopez comments upon in source 3? Why might the king of Sofala prefer a Portuguese alliance to subjection to Monomotapa?
3. What does source 4 suggest about Benin relations with the Portuguese?

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

What do these sources tell us about the ways Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans thought about themselves, perceived one another, and capitalized on cross-cultural exchanges as they came into sustained contact? Write a short essay that considers the connection between the impulses of warfare and commerce, which appear again and again in contact settings.



Banza in the Kingdom of Kongo, c. 1670

The city of Banza, or Mbanza Kongo, was the capital of the Kingdom of Kongo when Portuguese traders first arrived in 1483. Kongo's king, Nzinga a Nkuwu, chose to be baptized to cement an alliance with Portugal and took the name João I. Kongo became officially Christian and Banza came to be known as São Salvador. Duarte Lopez visited and described the city in 1578; this engraving shows the city as it appeared a century later. Banza in the Kingdom of Kongo, San Salvador, from Olfert Dapper, ca. 1668.

Henry's efforts were soon joined to those of Italian merchants, who were being forced out of eastern Mediterranean trade routes by the rising power of the Ottoman Empire. Cut off from Asia, Genoese traders sought an Atlantic route to the lucrative markets of the Indian Ocean. They began to work with Portuguese and Castilian mariners and monarchs to finance trading voyages, and the African coast and its offshore islands opened to their efforts. European voyagers discovered the Canaries, the Cape Verde Islands, and São Tomé; all of them became laboratories for the expansion of Mediterranean agriculture.

On these Atlantic islands, planters transformed local ecosystems to experiment with a variety of familiar cash crops: wheat, wine grapes, and woad, a blue dye plant; livestock and honeybees; and, where the climate permitted, sugar. By 1500,

IDENTIFY CAUSES

How did Europe's desire for an ocean route to Asia shape its contacts with Africa?

Madeira was producing 2,500 metric tons a year, and Madeira sugar was available—in small, expensive quantities—in London, Paris, Rome, and Constantinople. Most of the islands were unpopulated. The Canaries were the exception; it took Castilian adventurers decades to conquer the Guanches who lived there. Once defeated, they were enslaved to labor in the Canaries or on Madeira, where they carved irrigation canals into the island's steep rock cliffs.

Europeans made no such inroads on the continent of Africa itself. The coastal kingdoms were well defended, and yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery quickly struck down Europeans who spent any time in the interior of West Africa. Instead they maintained small, fortified trading posts on offshore islands or along the coast, usually as guests of the local king.

Portuguese mariners continued to look for an Atlantic route to Asia. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the southern tip of

Africa. Vasco da Gama reached East Africa in 1497 and India in the following year; his ships were mistaken for those of Chinese traders, the last pale-skinned men to arrive by sea. Although da Gama's inferior goods—tin basins, coarse cloth, honey, and coral beads—were snubbed by the Arab and Indian merchants along India's Malabar Coast, he managed to acquire a highly profitable cargo of cinnamon and pepper. Da Gama returned to India in 1502 with twenty-one fighting vessels, which outmaneuvered and outgunned the Arab fleets. Soon the Portuguese government set up fortified trading posts for its merchants at key points around the Indian Ocean, in Indonesia, and along the coast of China (Map 1.4). In a transition that sparked the momentous growth of European wealth and power, the Portuguese and then the Dutch replaced the Arabs as the leaders in Asian commerce.

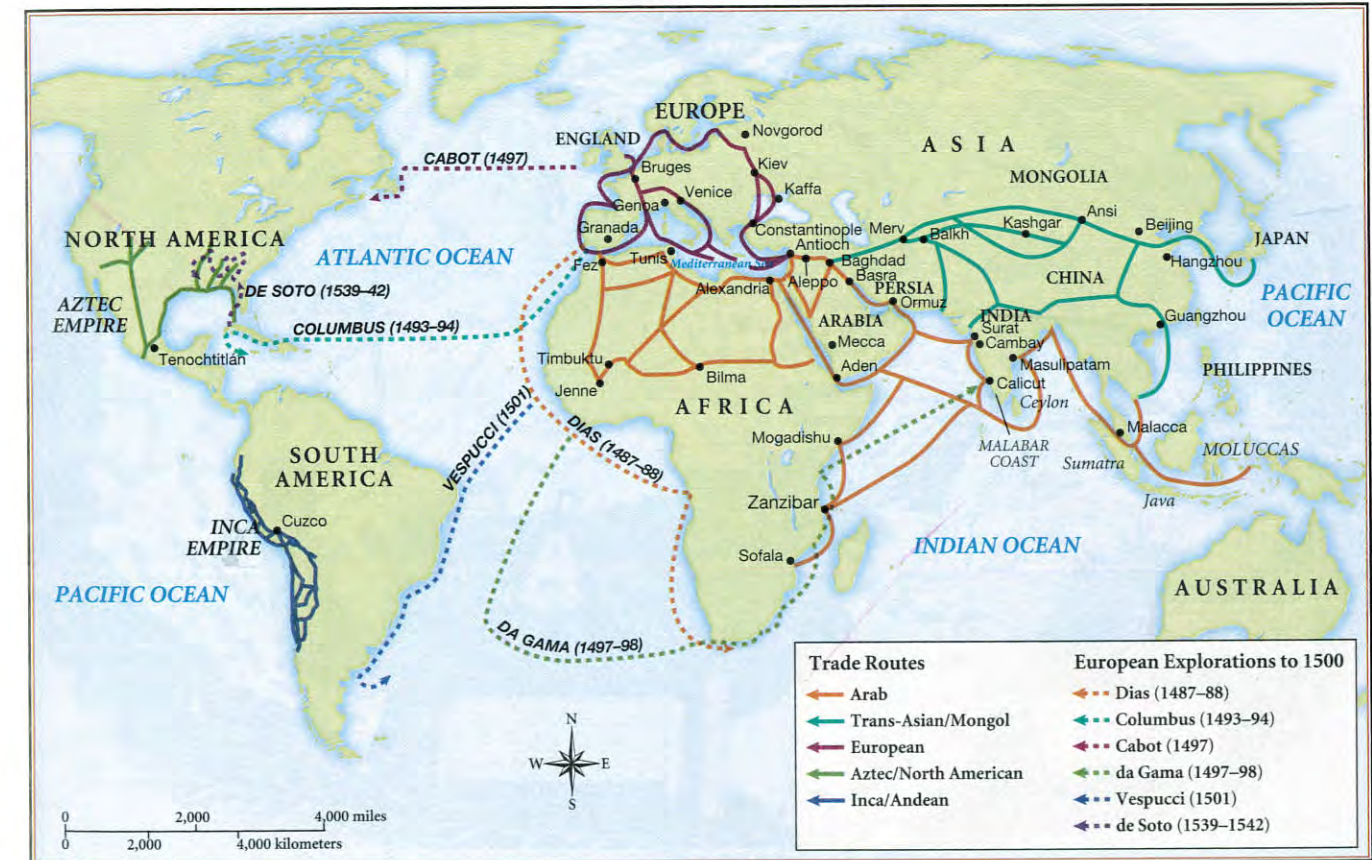
The African Slave Trade

Portuguese traders likewise ousted Arab merchants as the prime purveyors of African slaves. Coerced labor—through slavery, serfdom, or indentured servitude—was the norm in most premodern societies, and in Africa slavery was widespread. Some Africans were held in bondage as security for debts; others were sold into servitude by their kin in exchange for food in times of famine; many others were war captives.

Slaves were a key commodity of exchange, sold as agricultural laborers, concubines, or military recruits. Sometimes their descendants were freed, but others endured hereditary bondage. Sonni Ali (r. 1464–1492),

TRACE CHANGE OVER TIME

How was the African slave trade adapted to European needs?



MAP 1.4
The Eurasian Trade System and European Maritime Ventures, c. 1500

For centuries, the Mediterranean Sea was the meeting point for the commerce of Europe, North Africa, and Asia—via the Silk Road from China and the Spice Route from India. Beginning in the 1490s, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch rulers and merchants subsidized Christian maritime explorers who discovered new trade routes around Africa and new sources of wealth in the Americas. These initiatives undermined the commercial primacy of the Arab Muslim-dominated Mediterranean.

the ruler of the powerful Songhai Empire, personally owned twelve “tribes” of hereditary agricultural slaves, many of them seized in raids against stateless peoples.

Slaves were also central to the trans-Saharan trade. When the renowned Tunisian adventurer Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara from the Kingdom of Mali around 1350, he traveled with a caravan of six hundred female slaves, destined for domestic service or concubinage in North Africa, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire. Between A.D. 700 and 1900, it is estimated that as many as nine million Africans were sold in the trans-Saharan slave trade.

Europeans initially were much more interested in trading for gold and other commodities than in trading for human beings, but gradually they discovered the enormous value of human trafficking. To exploit and redirect the existing African slave trade, Portuguese merchants established fortified trading posts like those in the Indian Ocean beginning at Elmina in 1482,

where they bought gold and slaves from African princes and warlords. First they enslaved a few thousand Africans each year to work on sugar plantations on São Tomé, Cape Verde, the Azores, and Madeira; they also sold slaves in Lisbon, which soon had an African population of 9,000. After 1550, the Atlantic slave trade, a forced diaspora of African peoples, expanded enormously as Europeans set up sugar plantations in Brazil and the West Indies.

Sixteenth-Century Incursions

As Portuguese traders sailed south and east, the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile financed an explorer who looked to the west. As Renaissance rulers, Ferdinand (r. 1474–1516) and Isabella (r. 1474–1504) saw national unity and foreign commerce as the keys to power and prosperity. Married in an arranged match to combine their Christian



The Map Behind Columbus's Voyage

In 1489, Henricus Martellus, a German cartographer living in Florence, produced this huge (4 feet by 6 feet) view of the known world, probably working from a map devised by Christopher Columbus's brother, Bartholomew. The map uses the spatial projection of the ancient Greek philosopher Claudius Ptolemy (A.D. 90–168) and incorporates information from Marco Polo's explorations in Asia and Bartolomeu Dias's recent voyage around the tip of Africa. Most important, it greatly exaggerates the width of Eurasia, thereby suggesting that Asia lies only 5,000 miles west of Europe (rather than the actual distance of 15,000 miles). Using Martellus's map, Columbus persuaded the Spanish monarchs to support his westward voyage. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

kingdoms, the young rulers completed the centuries-long *reconquista*, the campaign by Spanish Catholics to drive Muslim Arabs from the European mainland, by capturing Granada, the last Islamic territory in Western Europe, in 1492. Using Catholicism to build a sense of “Spanishness,” they launched the brutal Inquisition against suspected Christian heretics and expelled or forcibly converted thousands of Jews and Muslims.

Columbus and the Caribbean Simultaneously, Ferdinand and Isabella sought trade and empire by subsidizing the voyages of Christopher Columbus, an ambitious and daring mariner from Genoa. Columbus believed that the Atlantic Ocean, long feared by Arab merchants as a 10,000-mile-wide “green sea of darkness,” was a much narrower channel of water separating Europe from Asia. After cajoling and lobbying for six years, Columbus persuaded Genoese investors in Seville; influential courtiers; and, finally, Ferdinand and Isabella to accept his dubious theories and finance a western voyage to Asia.

Columbus set sail in three small ships in August 1492. Six weeks later, after a perilous voyage of 3,000 miles, he disembarked on an island in the present-day Bahamas. Believing that he had reached Asia—“the Indies,” in fifteenth-century parlance—Columbus called the native inhabitants Indians and the islands the West Indies. He was surprised by the crude living conditions but expected the native peoples “easily [to] be made Christians.” He claimed the islands for Spain and then explored the neighboring Caribbean islands and demanded tribute from the local Taino, Arawak, and Carib peoples. Buoyed by stories of rivers of gold lying “to the west,” Columbus left forty men on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and returned triumphantly to Spain (Map 1.5).

To see a longer excerpt of Columbus's views of the West Indies, along with other primary sources from this period, see *Sources for America's History*.



MAP 1.5
The Spanish Conquest of America's Great Empires

The Spanish first invaded the islands of the Caribbean, largely wiping out the native peoples. Rumors of a gold-rich civilization led to Cortés's invasion of the Aztec Empire in 1519. By 1535, other Spanish conquistadors had conquered the Mayan temple cities and the Inca empire in Peru, completing one of the great conquests in world history.

The Spanish Conquest of Mexico

How could a Spanish force of 600 men take control of an empire of 20 million people? That the Spanish had steel swords, armor, some guns, horses, and attack dogs certainly gave them a military advantage. Still, concerted attack by the armies of the Aztecs and their allies would have overwhelmed the invaders before they reached the capital of Tenochtitlán. Why was there no such attack? One reason was that Cortés's force was bolstered by a sizable army from Tlaxcala, an independent kingdom hostile to the Aztecs. A later tradition also suggests that some Aztecs, including Moctezuma, thought that Cortés might be an emissary of their god Quetzalcoatl.

These documents come from people who experienced the conquest. Consider them first as *sources*: How trustworthy are they? Are they biased in any way? Then think about their *contents*: Do their accounts agree? Do they explain why the Spaniards reached the city unmolested?

Bernal Díaz del Castillo Cortés and Moctezuma Meet

Bernal Díaz was an unlikely chronicler of great events. Born poor, he went to America as a common soldier in 1514 and served under conquistadors in Panama and Cuba. In 1519, Bernal Díaz joined Cortés's expedition, fought in many battles, and as a reward received an estate in present-day Guatemala. In his old age, Díaz wrote *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, a compelling memoir written from the perspective of a common soldier. In fresh and straightforward prose, it depicts the conquest as a divinely blessed event that saved the non-Aztec peoples of Mexico from a barbarous regime.

The Great Moctezuma had sent these great Caciques in advance to receive us, and when they came before Cortés they bade us welcome in their language, and as a sign of peace, they touched their hands against the ground. . . .

When we arrived near to [Tenochtitlán], . . . the Great Moctezuma got down from his litter, and those great Caciques [aristocrats] supported him with their arms beneath a marvelously rich canopy of green coloured feathers with much gold and silver embroidery . . . which was wonderful to look at. The Great Moctezuma was richly attired according to his usage, and he was shod with sandals, the soles were of gold and the upper part adorned with precious stones. . . .

Many other Lords walked before the Great Moctezuma, sweeping the ground where he would tread and spreading cloths on it, so that he should not tread on the earth. Not one of these chieftains dared even to think of looking him in the face, but kept their eyes lowered with great reverence. . . .

When Cortés was told that the Great Moctezuma was approaching, and he saw him coming, he dismounted from his horse, and when he was near Moctezuma, they simultaneously paid great reverence to one another. Moctezuma bade him welcome and our Cortés replied through Doña Marina [Malinali, also called Malinche, Cortés's Indian interpreter who bore him a child] wishing him very good health. . . . And then Cortés brought out a necklace which he had ready at hand, made of glass stones, . . . which have within them many patterns of diverse colours, these were strung on a cord of gold and with musk so that it should have a sweet scent, and he placed it round the neck of the Great Moctezuma. . . . Then Cortés through the mouth of Doña Marina told him that now his heart rejoiced having seen such a great Prince, and that he took it as a great honour that he had come in person to meet him. . . .

Thus space was made for us to enter the streets of Mexico, without being so much crowded. But who could now count the multitude of men and women and boys who were in the streets and in canoes on the canals, who had come out to see us. It was indeed wonderful. . . . Coming to think it over it seems to be a great mercy that our Lord Jesus Christ was pleased to give us grace and courage to dare to enter into such a city; and for the many times He has saved me from danger of death . . . I give Him sincere thanks. . . .

They took us to lodge in some large houses, where there were apartments for all of us, for they had belonged to the father of the Great Moctezuma, who was named Axayaca. . . .

Cortés thanked Moctezuma through our interpreters, and Moctezuma replied, "Malinche, you and your brethren are in your own house, rest awhile," and then he went

to his palaces, which were not far away, and we divided our lodgings by companies, and placed the artillery pointing in a convenient direction, and the order which we had to keep was clearly explained to us, and that we were to be much on the alert, both the cavalry and all of us soldiers. A sumptuous dinner was provided for us according to their use and custom, and we ate it at once. So this was our lucky and daring entry into the great city of Tenochtitlan Mexico on the 8th day of November the year of our Saviour Jesus Christ, 1519.

Source: Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, trans. A. P. Maudslay (1632; London: Routledge, 1928), 272–275.

Friar Bernardino de Sahagún Aztec Elders Describe the Behavior of Moctezuma

During the 1550s, Friar Bernardino de Sahagún published *General History of the Things of New Spain*. His *History* compiled the stories of Aztec elders who lived through the conquest. They told their stories to Sahagún in a repetitive style, according to the conventions of Aztec oral histories, and he translated them into Spanish.

Moctezuma enjoyed no sleep, no food, no one spoke to him. Whatsoever he did, it was as if he were in torment. Ofttimes it was as if he sighed, became weak, felt weak. . . . Wherefore he said, "What will now befall us? Who indeed stands [in charge]? Alas, until now, I. In great torment is my heart; as if it were washed in chili water it indeed burns." And when he had so heard what the messengers reported, he was terrified, he was astounded. . . . Especially did it cause him to faint away when he heard how the gun, at [the Spaniards'] command, discharged: how it resounded as if it thundered when it went off. It indeed bereft one of strength; it shut off one's ears. And when it discharged, something like a round pebble came forth from within. Fire went showering forth; sparks went blazing forth. And its smoke smelled very foul; it had a fetid odor which verily wounded the head. And when [the shot] struck a mountain, it was as if it were destroyed, dissolved . . . as if someone blew it away.

All iron was their war array. In iron they clothed themselves. With iron they covered their heads. Iron were their swords. Iron were their crossbows. Iron were their shields. Iron were their lances. And those which bore them upon their backs, their deer [horses], were as tall as roof terraces.

And their bodies were everywhere covered; only their faces appeared. They were very white; they had chalky faces; they had yellow hair, though the hair of some was black. . . . And when Moctezuma so heard, he was much terrified. It was as if he fainted away. His heart saddened; his heart failed him. . . . [but] he made himself resolute; he put forth great effort; he quieted, he controlled his heart; he submitted himself entirely to whatsoever he was to see, at which he was to marvel. . . . [He then greeted Cortés, as described above.]

And when [the Spaniards] were well settled, they thereupon inquired of Moctezuma as to all the city's treasure . . . the devices, the shields. Much did they importune him; with great zeal they sought gold. . . . Thereupon were brought forth all the brilliant things; the shields, the golden discs, the devils' necklaces, the golden nose crescents, the golden leg bands, the golden arm bands, the golden forehead bands.

Source: From Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of New Spain*, translated by Arthur O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Copyright © 1975. Reprinted by permission of Utah Press.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

- Both Díaz's account and that of the Aztec elders were written in retrospect, and both reflect their authors' awareness of the impending conquest. Compare the tone of these accounts. How does each reflect the author's knowledge of what is to come?
- Why does Moctezuma pay "great reverence" to Cortés? Why does Cortés return the honor? What is the strategy of each leader?
- What is Díaz's explanation for the easy entry of the Spanish into the city? What explanation is suggested by the elders' account?

Although Columbus brought back no gold, the Spanish monarchs supported three more of his voyages. Columbus colonized the West Indies with more than 1,000 Spanish settlers—all men—and hundreds of domestic animals. But he failed to find either golden treasures or great kingdoms, and his death in 1506 went virtually unnoticed.

A German geographer soon labeled the newly found continents America in honor of a Florentine explorer, Amerigo Vespucci. Vespucci, who had explored the coast of present-day South America around 1500, denied that the region was part of Asia. He called it a *nuevo mundo*, a “new world.” The Spanish crown called the two continents *Las Indias* (“the Indies”) and wanted to make them a new Spanish world.

The Spanish Invasion After brutally subduing the Arawaks and Tainos on Hispaniola, the Spanish probed the mainland for gold and slaves. In 1513, Juan Ponce

de León explored the coast of Florida and gave that peninsula its name. In the same year, Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Darien (Panama) and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean. Rumors of rich Indian kingdoms encouraged other Spaniards, including hardened veterans of the *reconquista*, to invade the mainland. The Spanish monarchs offered successful conquistadors noble titles, vast estates, and Indian laborers.

With these inducements before him, in 1519 Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) led an army of 600 men to the Yucatán Peninsula. Gathering allies among native peoples who chafed under Aztec rule, he marched on Tenochtitlán and challenged its ruler, Moctezuma. Awed by the Spanish invaders, Moctezuma received Cortés with great ceremony (American Voices, p. 32). However, Cortés soon took the emperor captive, and following a prolonged siege, he and his men captured the city. The conquest took a devastating toll: the



Mexican Counterattack

This image, which comes from a history of the Aztecs written in 1570 by the Spanish Dominican monk Diego Durán, illustrates a successful counterattack by Mexica warriors against Spanish soldiers prior to the final conquest of Tenochtitlán. The Spaniards try to hold their position as the Mexicans prepare to strike. Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic/Arxiu Mas.

conquerors cut off the city's supply of food and water, and the residents of Tenochtitlán suffered spectacularly. By 1521, Cortés and his men had toppled the Aztec Empire.

The Spanish had a silent ally: disease. Having been separated from Eurasia for thousands of years, the inhabitants of the Americas had no immunities to common European diseases. After the Spaniards arrived, a massive smallpox epidemic ravaged Tenochtitlán, “striking everywhere in the city,” according to an Aztec source, and killing Moctezuma's brother and thousands more. “They could not move, they could not stir. . . . Covered, mantled with pustules, very many people died of them.” Subsequent outbreaks of smallpox, influenza, and measles killed hundreds of thousands of Indians and sapped the survivors' morale. Exploiting this demographic weakness, Cortés quickly extended Spanish rule over the Aztec Empire. His lieutenants then moved against the Mayan city-states of the Yucatán Peninsula, eventually conquering them as well.

In 1524, Francisco Pizarro set out to accomplish the same feat in Peru. By the time he and his small force of 168 men and 67 horses finally reached their destination in 1532, half of the Inca population had already died from European diseases. Weakened militarily and divided between rival claimants to the throne, the Inca nobility was easy prey. Pizarro killed Atahualpa, the last Inca emperor, and seized his enormous wealth. Although Inca resistance continued for a generation, the conquest was complete by 1535, and Spain was now the master of the wealthiest and most populous regions of the Western Hemisphere.

The Spanish invasion changed life forever in the Americas. Disease and warfare wiped out virtually all of the Indians of Hispaniola—at least 300,000 people. In Peru, the population of 9 million in 1530 plummeted to fewer than 500,000 a century later. Mesoamerica suffered the greatest losses: In one of the great demographic disasters in world history, its population of 20 million Native Americans in 1500 had dwindled to just 3 million in 1650.

Cabral and Brazil At the same time, Portuguese efforts to find a sailing route around the southern tip of Africa led to a surprising find. As Vasco da Gama and his contemporaries experimented with winds and currents, their voyages carried them ever farther away from the African coast and into the Atlantic. On one such voyage in 1500, the Portuguese commander Pedro Álvares Cabral and his fleet were surprised to see land loom up in the west. Cabral named his discovery *Ihla da Vera Cruz*—the Island of the True Cross—and

continued on his way toward India. Others soon followed and changed the region's name to Brazil after the indigenous tree that yielded a valuable red dye; for several decades, Portuguese sailors traded with the Tupi Indians for brazilwood. Then in the 1530s, to secure Portugal's claim, King Dom João III sent settlers who began the long, painstaking process of carving out sugar plantations in the coastal lowlands. For several decades, Native Americans supplied most of the labor for these operations, but African slaves gradually replaced them. Brazil would soon become the world's leading producer of sugar; it would also devour African lives. By introducing the plantation system to the Americas—a form of estate agriculture using slave labor that was pioneered by Italian merchants and crusading knights in the twelfth century and transplanted to the islands off the coast of Africa in the fifteenth century—the Portuguese set in motion one of the most significant developments of the early modern era.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the European colonization of the Americas had barely begun. Yet several of its most important elements were already taking shape. Spanish efforts demonstrated that densely populated empires were especially vulnerable to conquest and were also especially valuable sources of wealth. The Portuguese had discovered the viability of sugar plantations in the tropical regions of the Americas and pioneered the transatlantic slave trade as a way of manning them. And contacts with native peoples revealed their devastating vulnerabilities to Eurasian diseases—one part of the larger phenomenon of the Columbian Exchange (discussed in Chapter 2).

SUMMARY

Native American, European, and African societies developed independently over thousands of years before they experienced direct contacts with one another. In the Americas, residents of Mesoamerica and the Andes were fully sedentary (with individual ownership of land and intensive agriculture), but elsewhere societies were semisedentary (with central fields and villages that were occupied seasonally) or nonsedentary (hunter-gatherers). West and Central Africa also had a mix of sedentary, semisedentary, and nonsedentary settlements. Western Europe, by contrast, was predominantly sedentary. All three continents had a complex patchwork of political organization, from empires, to kingdoms and chiefdoms, to principalities, duchies, and ministates; everywhere, rulership was imbued with notions of spiritual power. Ruling classes relied on

warfare, trade, and tribute (or taxes) to dominate those around them and accumulate precious goods that helped to set them apart from ordinary laborers, but they also bore responsibility for the well-being of their subjects and offered them various forms of protection.

As Portuguese and Castilian (later Spanish) seafarers pushed into the Atlantic, they set in motion a chain of events whose consequences they could scarcely imagine. From a coastal trade with Africa that was secondary to their efforts to reach the Indian Ocean, from the miscalculations of Columbus and the happy accident of Cabral, developed a pattern of transatlantic

exploration, conquest, and exploitation that no one could have foretold or planned. In the tropical zones of the Caribbean and coastal Brazil, invading Europeans enslaved Native Americans and quickly drove them into extinction or exile. The demands of plantation agriculture soon led Europeans to import slaves from Africa, initiating a transatlantic trade that would destroy African lives on both sides of the ocean. And two of the greatest empires in the world—the Aztec and Incan empires—collapsed in response to unseen biological forces that acted in concert with small invading armies.



European Map of Brazil, c. 1519

This lavishly illustrated map of Brazil is drawn from the Miller Atlas, made by order of King Manuel I of Portugal around 1519. It features images of Indians harvesting brazilwood; macaws and other colorful birds; a monkey; and—improbably—a fire-breathing dragon. Note, too, the dense annotations and place names along the coast—a reminder that Portuguese familiarity with Brazil was confined almost entirely to the seaboard. Bibliotheque Nationale de France.