

The Age of Discovery

The Age of Exploration

The discovery of America was possible due to a number of factors:

Economic factors: Europeans want Oriental products, especially gold and spices. In that sense, traditionally the Mediterranean Sea had allowed access to these sources of wealth, but with the fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Turks, they began to hinder and aggravate the commercial contact between the West and the East by the Mediterranean, and hence the need of Westerners to find a new route.

Political factors: The Spanish monarchy had just completed the process of reconquest the Iberian Peninsula with the fall of Granada and wished to continue expanding its territories.

Religious factors: Both the papacy and the Christian monarchies wished to extend Christianity to all the peoples of the planet.

Eagerness for adventure and enrichment on the part of some gentlemen, who wished to verify the verisimilitude of some myths and legends and also to become great landlords

Scientific and technical knowledge: Important advances in navigation made it possible for European expeditions to travel long distances:

- The compass: had a magnetised needle that always pointed north. It allowed ships to sail when land wasn't visible and at night.
- The astrolabe and quadrant: calculated latitude by measuring the altitude of the Sun or the pole star above the horizon.
- A log and sandglass: allowed to know the ship's speed.
- Portolan charts: were maps that showed coasts, sea routes and possible obstacles.
- The caravel: was a new type of ship which was lighter, safer and bigger.

At the beginning of the 15th century, Europeans had limited geographical knowledge. They were very familiar with all of Europe and the territories around the Mediterranean and Black Seas. They also knew about India, China and Japan because travellers and merchants like Marco Polo brought silk, spices and other products back from Asia. But they knew very little about most of Africa. They did not know that America, Oceania and Antarctica even existed.

The Portuguese expeditions

From the early 15th century, Portugal wanted to find a trade route to India. This wouldn't be the same as the trade routes across the Mediterranean Sea which were used by Italian and Arab merchants. Prince Henry the Navigator, the son of King John I

of Portugal, promoted this ambitious project. He created a school of navigators in Sagres, which trained crews for expeditions.

The Portuguese carried out different expeditions in the 15th century. After the conquest of Ceuta (1415), Portuguese expeditions in the Atlantic Ocean discovered Madeira (1419) and the Azores (1431). Later, other Portuguese expeditions explored the coastline of West Africa. They occupied the Cape Verde islands (1446) and sailed to the Gulf of Guinea (1460). After the death of Henry the Navigator in 1460, Portuguese expeditions continued travelling. In 1487, Bartolomé Díaz reached the Cape of Good Hope, on the southern coast of Africa. This opened a route to the Indian Ocean.

Christopher Columbus planned to travel west across the Atlantic Ocean to establish a new route to Asia, and he requested financing from the King of Portugal. However, Columbus' project was rejected because Portugal had already discovered a new eastern route to Asia around the Cape of Good Hope. A few years later, in 1498, Vasco de Gama's expedition reached India. In this way, Portugal strengthened its presence in the Indian Ocean. Later, in 1500 Pedro Álvares Cabral discovered Brazil after his ship sailed too far west during a trip in the Atlantic Ocean.

As a result of these expeditions, Portugal created a great maritime empire. It was defended by fortified trading posts, called factories, which controlled trade and guaranteed supplies for the Portuguese fleets.

The Castilian expeditions

Christopher Columbus was a sailor from Genoa (Italy). He believed that the Earth was round, and that he could reach Asia by crossing the Atlantic Ocean. After his project was rejected by Portugal, Columbus presented it to the Catholic Monarchs (Reyes Católicos), who agreed to finance the expedition.

On 3 August 1492, the Nao, Pinta and Santa María ships left the port of Palos de la Frontera (Huelva). On 12 October 1492 Columbus' expedition finally reached land. Columbus thought that he had arrived in Japan. However, his calculations were wrong because the world was bigger than he believed. In fact, he had reached islands belonging to an unknown continent (later called America).

After his first expedition, Columbus made three more expeditions to explore the new territories and establish the Castilian route. On his second trip, he found a faster and safer route to America. On his third and fourth trips, he explored the coast of Central and South America. Columbus died in 1506 convinced that he had reached Asia. However, Americo Vesputio proved that the lands were part of a new continent, which was named America in his honour.

The conquest of America benefited from indigenous beliefs. Apparently, the Indians were waiting for the arrival of their God and when they saw the Spaniards riding on horses, they identified them with their God. Specifically, the Aztecs had two gods,

among others, a good Quetzalcoatl, who had left, and another bad Huitzilopochtli, which forced the performance of human sacrifices. Therefore, when they saw Hernán Cortes and the rest of the Spaniards, they identified them with Quetzalcoatl. Meanwhile, the Incas, seeing Francisco Pizarro, identified them with the Viracochas, divine beings who had also left. For this reason, initially the natives welcomed the Spaniards kindly and offered them a large quantity of products.

Also, some tribes and also some sectors of the population that were opposed to the emperor and his demands, supported the conquerors. However, when the Spaniards tried to obtain greater control of the territories, the confrontations began.

The beginning of the overseas empires

Portugal and Castilla wanted to control the territories discovered by their expeditions. To avoid conflict, they accepted mediation by de Pope. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) established that the line of division between Portuguese and Castellian territories would be along a meridian about 2,000 km west of the Azores. All of the territories east of this meridian belonged to Portugal. And the land to the west of this line belonged to Castilla. Therefore, most of America was Castellian.

The expeditions marked the beginning of Portugal and Castilla's great overseas empires. They were the start of European domination throughout the world. As a result of the trips of discovery, people learned a great deal about the new territories around the world. Many new species of plants and animals were discovered.

The first trip around the world

In 1519 an expedition left Seville under its captain Fernando de Magallanes. Their goal was to find a route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Molucas Islands known as the "spice islands" in the Pacific Ocean. In 1520, this expedition crossed a strait connecting the two oceans (later known as the Strait of Magallanes) and sailed across the Pacific Ocean to the Philippines. There, Magallanes died and Juan Sebastián Elcano replaced him. In 1522, the expedition came back to Spain.

This expedition completed the first journey round the world and showed that the Earth was round.

Pre-Columbian America

When the first Europeans reached America, they found Pre-Columbian inhabitants. Some of them lived in small tribes. But there were some civilisations as the Mayas, the Aztecs and the Incas.

- The Mayas: lived in some territories of Central America. There wasn't a state, but also the Mayas were organised in independent cities. Their economy was mainly based on agriculture (specially corn, cotton, cacao and tomatoes). They were polytheistic. They built palaces and temples in the form of step pyramids.
- The Incas: lived in the Andes range. They created a vast empire with the capital in Cuzco. Their emperor was the Inca, who was believed to be the son of the Sun. Their economy was based on agriculture (specially corn and potatoes) but they had to build terraces on steep mountainsides; and, also on livestock (specially llamas and alpacas). They were polytheistic. They built palaces and temples.
- The Aztecs: lived in the Mexican Valley. They created an empire with the capital in Tenochtitlán. The emperor had political and religious power. Their economy was mainly based on agriculture, but they were also potters, goldsmiths and silversmiths. They were polytheistic and they offered human sacrifices. They built palaces and temples in the form of pyramids.

Consequences of the conquest

Consequences for America: Spaniards in particular and Europeans in general transferred and imposed their economic, political, social, religious, cultural and intellectual model in America. From the economic point of view, technical innovations were introduced in the field of agriculture (use of draft and draft animals), manufacturing (potter's wheel) and mining, new products and animals were introduced (cereal and sheep) and they were incorporated to the great commercial routes. From the political point of view, Hispanic institutions such as audiences or viceroys, among others, were transferred. From the social point of view, greater social complexity, diminution of the indigenous population due to wars and microbial shock, subjection of the indigenous population to the Hispanic population and the birth of a new social group, the criollos. From the religious point of view, the Catholic religion spread among the Indians and traditional myths and legends disappeared. From the cultural point of view, Castilian was adopted as the vehicular language and the indigenous languages practically disappeared, the artistic and urbanistic tastes were transferred (cities in a grid). And finally, from the intellectual point of view, the ideas of the Enlightenment, then the basis of the independences, were introduced.

Consequences for Castilla: From the economic point of view, increase of its resources of gold and silver, greater disposition of means of payment, and consequently, increase of prices, and incorporation of new products such as cocoa, corn, potato or tobacco. From the political point of view, configuration of a great colonial empire in which "the sun never sets" which demanded a broad administrative structure. From the scientific point of view, it allowed the knowledge of a new continent and its incorporation into the new maps, and also of an important number of medicinal plants.