

New Horizons: Exploration 1400-1550

1. Reasons for the increase of exploration in the 14th and 15th centuries. Intellectual curiosity and religious evangelism. The quest for wealth.
2. The Chinese in India and East Africa. The upsurge of naval activity in the fifteenth century, and the reasons for its end.
3. The Islamic world. The importance of the Haj. Muslim expansion in Asia; trade in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. War in the Eastern Mediterranean.
4. Iberian patronage, from Henry the Navigator to Christopher Columbus. The treaty of Tordesillas.
5. Spanish colonisation in the New World; Portuguese trade to Asia; French and English privateers.
6. The importance of shipbuilding technology; the development of cartography and navigation in the West. The development of capability.
7. Case studies of the following:

Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9)

Zheng He (1371-1433)

Piri Reis (1470-1554)

Ferdinand Magellan (c.1480-1521)

Vasco da Gama (1460-1524)

Francisco de Orellana (1510-1545?)

Sebastian Cabot (c.1480-1557)

4. SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE COLONISATION

Spanish expansion in the New World was based on the original colony of Hispaniola.

The main centre of that settlement had been moved from its first insalubrious site to Santo Domingo, by **Bartolome, Columbus' brother**, whom he had left in charge when he returned to Spain in 1496.

When he came back to the Indies in 1498, he found the colony in chaos which he was unable to resolve, and he was replaced in charge by Francisco de Bobadilla in the spring of 1499.

Bobadilla was a 'trouble shooter', and settled government really dates from the arrival of his successor, Fray Nicholas de Ovando in 1500.

He governed for about six years, imposing severe discipline upon the settlers (of which they were much in need), and exacting tribute and forced labour from the subjugated natives.

In the process he exterminated the Tainos, who were the original inhabitants, but won for the colony a modest prosperity based upon pig farming, cattle ranching and the cultivation of sugar.

A little gold was even extracted from the streams, keeping alive Spanish hopes of untold riches.

Partly for that reason, and partly because of a lack of opportunities at home, a steady stream of new Spanish settlers was arriving in the colony.

They were, however, looking for conquests and for labour to exploit rather than the back breaking work of tilling the land for themselves, and this led to two developments.

In the first place the importation of slaves from the Portuguese settlements in West Africa, and in the second place to the spread of colonisation to other islands.

In 1509 Juan de Esquivel began the settlement of Jamaica, which was a disappointment because it yielded no precious metals, and proved capable of supporting only a modest population of ranchers.

Then in 1511 the much larger enterprise of colonising Cuba was undertaken by Diego Valesquez, who had been Ovando's deputy on Hispaniola.

This was much more successful,

- 1. partly because Valesquez had learned from Ovando the importance of maintaining discipline,**
- 2. partly because he was exceptionally shrewd in choosing sites for his settlements.**

He founded altogether seven towns, and all remained more or less where he had positioned them.

Unlike Jamaica, Cuba proved to be a valuable source of gold, and it was also more fertile than Hispaniola, creating opportunities not only for ranching, but also for tobacco farming and sugar plantations.

As usual, the indigenous population was subdued by force, and compelled to work in the fields or the mines in return for the privilege of conversion to the Christian faith.

The fourth island to be colonised was Puerto Rico, which in spite of its name, turned out to be another disappointment.

First the native inhabitants were Caribs, who were much harder to subdue than the Tainos, and Second the first governor, Juan Ponce de Leon, extended himself too far in attempting also to establishment a settlement on the mainland of Florida.

Although the colony survived on Puerto Rico, and even achieved a modest prosperity, it did not attract large numbers of Spaniards.

Meanwhile, various exploratory probes had been made along the coast of the mainland.

In 1499

- 1. Columbus's former companion, Vincente Yanez Pinzon, went south along the shores of Brazil, getting as far as the delta of the Amazon.**
- 2. Alonso de Hojeda in the same year explored the coast of Venezuela, discovering in the process the valuable pearl fishery of Margarita.**

A settlement was even established on the island of Cubagua to exploit this, which for about 25 years – until over fishing destroyed the resource – was one of the richest colonies in the New World.

In 1504 Juan de la Cosa carried out a thorough exploration of the coast, and as result it was decided (in Spain) to extend colonisation, and two expeditions set out at the end of 1509, numbering altogether over 1000 men.

The result came close to disaster because hunger, sickness and native opposition reduced this imposing force to a few score.

Balboa, who was 'evolved' into his position rather than appointed to it, was the first of the great conquistadores.

He founded the city of Darien, and achieved an ascendancy over the natives of the isthmus by a mixture of force and conciliation, which enabled him to collect from them large quantities of both food and gold.

The latter was more valued by the Spaniards than by the Indians, which eased its acquisition.

At the same time he compelled his own people to build houses and plant crops, thus making sensible provision for the future, and reducing dependence on the goodwill of the inhabitants.

In 1513 he crossed the isthmus and 'discovered' the Southern Ocean.

So narrow was the land at that point that he soon had his colonists building boats on the Pacific side and exploring this hitherto unknown coastline.

Unfortunately it was some time before ocean going craft could be constructed on that side, and in 1519 Magellan's circumnavigation revealed that Spain had lost the race to the Indies.

It was not until the next generation that Spanish ships from the New World were able to discover and take possession of the Philippines.

Meanwhile Balboa's activities had been misreported in Spain, where his ruthlessness was emphasised and his humanity and shrewdness ignored.

In 1513, so that when a royal governor was appointed to Darien it was not Balboa, but Pedro Arias de Avila.

Avila undid most of his predecessor's constructive work with the Indians, and had Balboa himself executed on a charge of treason in 1519.

The only good thing to be said for his regime is that it represented the determination of the Spanish Crown to establish a grip on what was happening in the New World; a determination already represented by the establishment of an *Audiencia*, or court of Appeal at Santo Domingo in 1511 and by the creation in the same year of the Council of the Indies to advise the king on colonial policy.

By the time of Balboa's death rumours had reached the coast of a great and sophisticated civilisation in the interior; a people who built cities, wove fabrics and indulged in the horrors of human sacrifice.

These rumours aroused the interest of Diego Valasquez the Governor of Cuba, who sent out exploratory voyages in 1517 and 1518 to reconnoitre the coasts of Yucatan and the Gulf of Mexico, with the result that in 1519 he mounted a large fleet for the purposes of exploration and trade, and appointed as its commander one Herman Cortes.

Cortes was popular and attracted a force of some 600 volunteers.

He was also ambitious, and upon landing in Mexico wasted no time in repudiating Valasquez's authority, thus turning the expedition into his own personal venture.

There are several contemporary accounts of what followed the most reliable being Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *True History*, which, as well as providing a narrative of events makes clear the motivation which was driving the Spanish adventurers.

They were greedy for gold, for lands and for slaves, but equally they were passionate evangelists for their Catholic faith, and loved great deeds for their own sake.

They thought of themselves as the equals of the heroes of ancient times, and were about to make good their claim.

Cortes began as he intended to go on, with two gestures calculated to reinforce his own authority.

- 1. He burned the boats in which his company had arrived, thus making sure that none of them sneaked back to Cuba, and**
- 2. He established the notional 'town' of Vera Cruz.**

Having appointed magistrates to this non-existent settlement, he then surrendered to them his commission from Valasquez, and received another in the name of the Spanish Crown.

He then wrote to King Charles, informing him of what he had done, and implying that the king now had another independent colony.

He then led his tiny army into the interior, taking advantage of the fact that most of the tribes whom he encountered were discontented with their Aztec overlords, and willing to collaborate with their enemies.

These allies supplied Cortes with food, porters, fighting auxiliaries and (most important) with information.

It was from them that he learned of Quetzacoatl, that bearded god of the Toltecs whose advent had been predicted for about the time that the Spaniards had landed, and decided to take advantage of that superstitious fear which surrounded him.

As he advanced, the Aztecs made various attempts to deflect him with gifts and pleas of poverty, and, restraining his allies, when he first arrived in Tenochtitlan, it was ostensibly in peace, as an honoured guest.

The first disturbance of this harmony came not from the Aztecs, or from Cortes, but from Cuba. Enraged by the latter's declaration of independence, Velasquez sent a powerful force to bring him to book.

Cortes, however, displaying the finest qualities of his diplomacy, out manoeuvred its commander and persuaded most of the men to join forces with his own venture.

However, when he returned, suitably reinforced, to Tenochtitlan he found that the religious zeal of his subordinates had provoked the Aztecs to war.

Montezuma, the complaisant king, had been stoned to death by his own people, and the city was in chaos.

Having unwittingly walked into a trap, Cortes then had to fight his way out again, and lost almost a third of his men in the process.

Fortunately his allies remained loyal and he was able to retreat to Tlaxcala to re-group.

There he built boats to navigate the lake, and returned in a purposeful fashion to lay siege to the city.

With his allies making up what he lacked in numbers, he slowly advanced, destroying buildings as he went, and in 1521 the surviving Aztecs surrendered.

They had only ever been a relatively small warrior aristocracy, holding down a largely reluctant population, and this defeat broke the spell of their supremacy.