CHAPTER 1

New World Beginnings, 33,000 B.C.E.–1769 C.E.

# Focus Questions

1. What was Native American society like before European contact? What similarities and differences existed?

2. What factors led to Europe’s increased exploration and to the discovery of the New World?

3. What is the Columbian Exchange? What are some of the results of the Columbian Exchange?

4. What was the role of *conquistadores* and *encomienda* in establishing a Spanish Empire in the New World?

5. What was the geographic extent of the Spanish Empire in the New World? What nations were challenging Spain’s dominance in the New World and where?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The first discoverers of America, the ancestors of the American Indians, were small bands of hunters who crossed a temporary land bridge from Siberia and spread across both North and South America. They evolved a great variety of cultures, which ranged from the sophisticated urban civilizations in Mexico and Central and South America to the largely seminomadic societies of North America.

**Theme:** Europe’s growing demand for Eastern luxuries prompted exploration in the hopes of reducing the expense of those goods with new trade routes. Exploration occurred incrementally, beginning with the Portuguese moving around the coast of Africa and establishing trading posts. Awareness of the New World and its wealth pushed exploration across the Atlantic. Spanish exploration continued in the same fashion, first in the Caribbean islands and then expanding into South and North America.

**Theme:** Portuguese and Spanish explorers encountered and then conquered much of the Americas and their Indian inhabitants. This “collision of worlds” deeply affected all the Atlantic societies—Europe, the Americas, and Africa—as the effects of disease, conquest, slavery, and intermarriage began to create a truly “new world” in Latin America, including the borderlands of Florida, New Mexico, and California, all of which later became part of the United States.

chapter summary

Millions of years ago, the two American continents became geologically separated from the Eastern Hemisphere land masses where humanity originated. The first people to enter these continents came across a temporary land bridge from Siberia about 35,000 years ago. Spreading across the two continents, they developed a great variety of societies based largely on corn agriculture and hunting. In North America, some ancient Indian peoples like the Pueblos, the Anasazi, and the Mississippian culture developed elaborate settlements. But on the whole, North American Indian societies were less numerous and urbanized than those in Central and South America, though equally diverse in culture and social organization.

The impetus for European exploration came from the desire for new trade routes to the East, the spirit and technological discoveries of the Renaissance, and the power of the new European national monarchies. The European encounters with Africa and America, beginning with the Portuguese and Spanish explorers, convulsed the entire world. Biological change, disease, population loss, conquest, African slavery, cultural change, and economic expansion were just some of the consequences of the commingling of the Old World and the New World.

After they conquered and then intermarried with Indians of the great civilizations of South America and Mexico, the Spanish *conquistadores* expanded northward into the northern border territories of Florida, New Mexico, and California. There they established small but permanent settlements in competition with the French and English explorers who also were venturing into North America.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Using globes and maps, examine the impact of geology and geography on the prehistory and history of the Americas. Point out the areas of relatively dense Indian population and civilization before 1492 and emphasize the ways in which geography shaped the subsequent pattern of European exploration and conquest—in both South and North America.

REFERENCE: D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of Atlantic America* (1986)*.*

* Explore what has been learned from history, anthropology, and archaeology regarding the life of American Indians before 1492. Emphasize that these societies were varied and dynamic, and had undergone significant conflicts and changes over many centuries. Perhaps select one North American Indian culture that had disappeared by the time of the Columbian encounter (e.g., the Anasazi culture that built Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon in the Southwest) and compare their ways of life with those of the Indians that the Europeans first met when they arrived.

REFERENCE: Brian M. Fagan, *Kingdoms of Gold, Kingdoms of Jade: The Americas Before Columbus* (1991).

* Analyze, in more depth, the condition of European societies at the beginning of the age of exploration. Consider, for example, the ways in which Europe was still medieval in its outlook around 1500 or so, and the ways in which it was being affected by more modern developments. Point out the changes in Europe that were occurring almost simultaneously with the age of discovery—particularly, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Italian Renaissance, the unification of Spain, and the reign of Henry VIII—and consider their impact on the Americas.

REFERENCE: Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (1974).

* Discuss the exchanges involved in the encounter of Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans in the New World. Focus particularly on the ways in which all parties in the process—the conquerors as well as the conquered—were changed. The emphasis could be on issues of population, intermarriage, agriculture, and the like, or on the new forms of society that developed in both Hispanic America and North America as a result of the events of 1492 and after.

REFERENCES: Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640* (1980); Ramon A. Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away* (1991).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* What is history? Can history change? Is there a difference between history and the past? How do you learn history? How do you learn about the past? What makes something (a piece of writing or an artifact) a good piece of information about the past? What role does bias play in recording, learning, and understanding history?
* Consider the whole story of the settlement and discovery of America from the Indians’ point of view. Examine the controversies over Columbus’s role in the discovery and the actions of subsequent Spanish *conquistadores.*
* Compare the development and subsequent history of the Spanish in Mexico with that of the English in North America. Consider, particularly, the impact of the *mestizo* factor in Mexican history (a result of the intermarriage of Spanish and Indians), compared with the quite different pattern of English relations with the Indians in North America.
* Discuss the different historical perspective obtained by considering the role of the Spanish borderlands of Florida, New Mexico, and California as part of the history of colonial America (as distinct from examining only the later English settlements along the Atlantic coast). How does our understanding of American history alter if we consider developments in these areas to be of equal importance?

# character sketches

## Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)

Although his encounter with continents and peoples previously unknown to Europeans transformed world history, Columbus, the Genoese sailor who discovered America for the Spanish monarchy, never really understood the nature or significance of his accomplishment.

Having sailed under the flags of many nations, including Portugal, Columbus was already a well-known, successful voyager when he became obsessed with the idea of reaching Cathay (China) and the Indies by sailing west. His frustrating inability to gain backing for the venture ended when Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to supply him with three ships.

The great achievement of Columbus’s first voyage was not only to navigate unknown waters under unprecedented conditions but also to keep his crews from mutiny—especially when the ships were becalmed after nearly sixty days. Although well aware, during all his voyages, that he was not in China or India, Columbus became firmly convinced that he had found islands just off the Asian coast and that the rich cities of Japan and China were not far away. This notion was reinforced by his desperate need to obtain continuing funding from the Spanish rulers, who pressed ever harder for concrete economic gains from the voyages.

**Quote:** “The inhabitants of this and of all the other islands I have found or gained intelligence of, both men and women, go as naked as they were born, with the exception that some of the women cover one part only with a single leaf or grass with a piece of cotton, made for that purpose…. I gave away a thousand good and pretty articles which I had brought with me in order to win their affection, and that they might be led to become Christians, and be well inclined to love and serve their highnesses and the whole Spanish nation….” (Letter on the first voyage, 1493)

REFERENCE: John Stewart Wilford, *The Mysterious History of Columbus* (1991).

## Moctezuma II (1466–1520)

Moctezuma II (also called Montezuma II) was the Aztec ruler who succumbed to Cortés’s invasion of Mexico.

He was the tenth in the line of Aztec emperors who controlled the vast regions and diverse peoples of Mexico from their rich capital at Tenochtitlán. Like other members of the royal aristocracy, he lived in luxury and served as a high priest of the elaborate but cruel Aztec religion. He succeeded to the throne in 1502, on the death of his uncle Ahuitzotl.

Before Cortés arrived, Moctezuma had expanded the Aztec realm, yet controlling the increasingly restless subordinate peoples of the empire demanded more and more of his energy. He was particularly devoted to the god Huitzilopochtli, but also came under the influence of astrologers and readers of portents. Their pessimistic predictions about his fate evidently weakened his will to resist the Spanish invaders.

After Cortés and his men seized Moctezuma and held him under house arrest, the people of Tenochtitlán became increasingly hostile to their leader. When Moctezuma appeared in public for the first time in nearly a year in early 1520, the angry populace showered him with stones before he could retreat indoors. The Spanish claimed that the wounded ruler died shortly thereafter from the stoning, but many Aztecs believed that the Spanish killed him. The truth remains unknown.

**Quote:** “I have in truth seen you and have now set eyes upon your force. You have come between mists and clouds, and now it has come to pass. Now you have arrived, with much fatigue and toil. Come to our land, come and repose.” (Message to Cortés as he approached Tenochtitlán, 1519)

REFERENCE: Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (1994).

## Hernán Cortés (1485–1547)

Like many *conquistadores*, Cortés was born into a noble family, but as a younger son failed to inherit extensive lands and wealth. As a youth, he was restless, ambitious, and nearly uncontrollable. In 1504, at age nineteen, he sailed for the island of Hispaniola (today’s Dominican Republic and Haiti), at that time the headquarters of Spanish activity in the New World.

Cortés farmed and worked as a minor town official for six years, but he longed for greater adventures. In 1511, he joined a successful expedition to Cuba and then used a commission from the governor of Cuba, Velazquez, to assemble an expedition of eleven ships, five hundred soldiers, and sixteen horses. Although Velazquez soon changed his mind, Cortés had already sailed for Mexico. Cortés’s brilliant, if treacherous, combination of military, political, and psychological tactics overcame Aztec resistance and gained him an empire larger than Spain. His reports of his conquests, contained in five lengthy letters to King Charles V of Spain, are full of fascinating detail, as well as much boasting and exaggeration.

Cortés was a talented administrator, but peaceful pursuits did not suit him, and in 1524, he headed for Honduras in search of further glory. There, he succeeded only in ruining his health and undermining his position in Mexico City. He retired to his estate in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1528, and in 1540, returned to Spain to die, a broken man.

**Quote:** “Touching Montezuma’s palace and all that was remarkable in his magnificence and power, there is so much to describe that I do not know how to begin.…There could be nothing more magnificent than that this barbarian lord should have all the things of heaven to be found under his domain, fashioned in gold and silver and jewels and feathers.” (Second letter to King Charles V, 1521)

REFERENCE: Jon White, *Cortés and the Downfall of the Aztec Empire: A Study in the Conflict of Cultures,* rev. ed. (1989).

# questions for class discussion

1. How did Indian societies of South and North America differ from European societies at the time the two came into contact? In what ways did Indians retain a worldview different from that of the Europeans?

2. What role did disease and forced labor (including slavery) play in the early settlement of America? Is the view of the Spanish and Portuguese as especially harsh conquerors and exploiters valid—or is this image just another version of the English Black Legend concerning the Spanish role in the Americas?

3. Are the differences between Latin America and North America due primarily to the differences between the respective Indian societies that existed in the two places, or to the disparity between Spanish and English culture? What would have happened if the English had conquered densely settled Mexico and Peru, and the Spanish had settled more thinly populated North America?

4. In what ways are the early (pre-1600) histories of Mexican and the present-day American Southwest understood differently now that the United States is being so substantially affected by Mexican and Latin American immigration and culture? To what extent should this now be regarded as part of our American history?

5. Why was the Old World able to dominate the New World? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Old World? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the New World?

**CONTENDING VOICES: JUAN GINÉS DE SEPULVEDA VS. BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS**

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What were the two Spanish scholars debating?
2. How had the two scholars experienced the New World differently?

# makers of america: The *Conquistadores*

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. Should the Spanish *conquistadores* be especially blamed for the cruelties and deaths (including those by disease) inflicted on the original Indian populations of the Americas? Is it possible to make such criticisms without falling into the traditional English fallacies of the Black Legend?

2. What is the long-term significance for Latin America of the immortality achieved by the *conquistadores* through intermarriage with Indian women?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Examine the careers of Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro in both Spain and the New World, and assess the reasons for their success.
* Examine some visual portrayals of the conquests of Mexico and Peru from the past and present, and compare how, over time, artists of various political outlooks have depicted the *conquistadores* and their victims.