

SPANISH EMPIRE—EXPLORATION

1430 to 1540

PRINCE HENRY THE NAVIGATOR TO DISCOVERY OF THE MISSISSIPPI

Era Summary—Exploration

Hispanic Exploration—During the fifteenth century, the countries of Portugal and Spain embarked on an adventure of sea-faring exploration, the results of which were to dramatically change the course of world history, and thoroughly upset the existing balance of national powers. It is almost impossible to overstate the significance of European exploration and conquest, led by the Iberian states of Spain and Portugal during this era. More than any other factor, the discovery of the new continents of the western hemisphere, and just as significantly, the increased trading opportunities in the far east, changed the entire outlook of European thought and the western economy. Eventually other nations besides Spain and Portugal, most notably France, Holland, and England, became involved in trade and exploration, but the Hispanic explorers and conquistadors were the first and most significant.

Portuguese Exploration—The first notable name in sea-faring exploration was [Prince Henry the Navigator](#), a Portuguese Prince, who undertook many groundbreaking projects in navigation, map-making, and ship-building. In particular, he popularized the use of the caravel for long-distance voyages, and collected all known knowledge of the geography of the continent of Africa. From his base at Sagres in the south of Portugal he sent off numerous expeditions to the mysterious regions of Africa. Each expedition proceeded further than the one previously, and each crew returned with reports of new sites and new geographic discoveries. These explorations culminated in the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope by [Bartholomew Diaz](#) in 1488, and the first sea-faring voyage to India, by way of Africa, by [Vasco da Gama](#) in 1498.

Once a path to the rich markets of the east was open to westerners, the colonization of territories in the east, to serve as trading stations, was undertaken. Portugal succeeded in setting up colonies that would serve both as trading ports and also as refueling stations along the way. Although the Portuguese sought trade with the mainland in the east, they generally colonized islands in the far east rather than attempting to set up trading stations on the mainland, since islands were more easily defended. Some of the earliest Portuguese settlements were on Socotra, Ceylon, Goa, Ormuz, Malacca, Macau, and Nagasaki. Several of these islands were already controlled by Moslem traders rather than natives, so most of the combat that the Portuguese was involved in during their early years of conquest was directed against the Moslem Turks rather than the native princes of the region. Two of the most famous sailors involved in establishing the Portuguese empire in the east were [Alfonso de Albuquerque](#) and [Francisco de Almeida](#). The Portuguese domination of the eastern trade lasted only until the late 1500's, when they began to lose ground to the Dutch, but they retained important colonies in the east and in Africa until the twentieth century.

Columbus and the West Indies—During the same era that Portugal was establishing trading routes to the east, the Spanish, led first by Christopher Columbus, were establishing colonies in the New World. Whereas the Portuguese, once they doubled the Cape of Good Hope, encountered the advanced civilization of the east, and from the first had access to maps and navigational aids used by the Moslem traders, the Spanish in America had no clear idea of the

geography of the region, and there were no previously established trading ports. There were, however, (very unfortunately for the natives), rumors of gold and silver, so from the beginning the exploration of the new world was driven by adventure seekers, and grasping, greedy, and brutal soldiers-of-fortune, rather than established merchants. The atrocities committed by the Spanish explorers against the native inhabitants of the west Indies was therefore, far worse than that inflicted by the Portuguese in the east.

In the earliest years of Spanish exploration in the new world, the initiative for exploration and conquest was driven largely by individual explorers, rather than being masterminded by the Spanish crown. In many cases, government support was only provided after "proof" of riches had already been established. [Vasco Nunez Balboa](#), [Ponce de Leon](#), [Hernando Cortez](#), [Francisco Pizarro](#), and [Hernando De Soto](#), all undertook ambitious expeditions largely on their own initiative, and almost all either came to a bad end, or were bypassed by the Spanish government, who put their own functionaries in charge of governing the newly-discovered region.

Some of these early Spanish governors, including [Davila](#) and Ovando, were much worse villains than the famous explorers, and were largely responsible for the systematic atrocities against the natives and their eventual extermination. While the explorers themselves undertook tremendous personal risks, endured insufferable hardships, and in all cases encountered the natives in situations in which they were overwhelmingly outnumbered, the cowardly and despicable governors lived in state and security, attacked and pillaged defenseless villages with enormous armies, and enslaved the native populations, so that they might gain promotion by sending gold home to Spain. Too much calumny, in modern times, is heaped on the well-known explorers, who were in every case, at least extraordinarily brave and interesting characters, and not enough on the craven and villainous government representatives, who are far more deserving of scorn.

In the years after Columbus established the first European settlement in the Americas, on the Island which is now the Dominican Republic, (then known as Santo Domingo), the region was thought to be a group of islands to the east of India; hence they were referred to as the "West Indies". Columbus made four voyages, and during each explored more of the region, but never found a passage to the orient, much to the disappointment of many of those who joined him on subsequent voyages, expecting opportunities for quick riches. He was stripped of his title, and replaced as governor of Santo Domingo and generally badly treated by the Spanish government after the death of his sponsor, Isabella, due to the fact that the riches anticipated by his discoveries were slow to materialize.

Later Explorers—Later explorers, such as Ojeda, Pinzon, and Vespucci finally established, by sailing up and down the coast of south American and Mexico, that the new world was, in fact, a new and unknown continent. About the same time this knowledge came to light, Vasco de Gama successfully sailed around the Cape of Africa, and successfully established a sea-route to the Orient. The combination of the two events changed the aspect of things considerably. Henceforth, serious traders and merchants focused their efforts more on establishing fixed routes by way of Africa, leaving the Americas to be explored primarily by adventurers and relatively unsavory types, whose main interest in the region was plunder and gold rather than trade.

The Spanish governors who followed Columbus began to "pacify" Santo Domingo and neighboring islands, often in the most brutal manner imaginable. Their only concern was to gain riches to send back to Spain, and this could only be done by plunder and enslavement of the

natives, and still, there was great disappointment because although the natives had some gold ornaments, no gold mines, or large reserves of gold were ever found.

The first Spanish settlement on the mainland was established at Darien near the Isthmus of Panama in 1510. The famous names associated with Darien include [Pedrarias Davila](#), [Francisco Pizarro](#), [Hernando De Soto](#), and most famously, [Vasco Nunez Balboa](#). Balboa was the original founder of the colony, and a few years after establishing himself in the region and making peace with most of the native chiefs, Balboa and a small crew crossed the isthmus and discovered the Pacific Ocean in 1513. When he returned to Darien, however, he was replaced as a governor by Pedrarias, a thoroughly wretched creature, who makes even the murderous Balboa look sympathetic by comparison. On his travels Balboa had also heard rumors of the great Incan Empire to the south, and spent the last few years of his life building a small fleet on the Pacific Ocean with which he could explore the western coast of South America. Pedrarias, however, was jealous of Balboa and had him tried and executed on trumped-up charges.

Exploration of Florida—It is fortunate for current residents of the American southwest the eastern half of the United States is almost devoid of gold, silver, or precious metals. This is the main reason the region was left relatively free from conquistadors, soldiers-of-fortune, and rapacious governors during the 16th century, so that it could be settled later by farmers, traders, and craftsmen rather than plundered for loot.

Rogues, mercenaries, scallywags, butchers and scoundrels were not lacking in England or France but they simply became pirates and privateers, and stole gold from the Spanish galleons. They also sacked and plundered Spanish towns to the muffled cheers of their governments.

Early Spanish explorers, most notably [Ponce de Leon](#), [Hernando De Soto](#), and [Francisco de Coronado](#) did explore the regions of America north of Mexico, which the Spanish called *Florida*, but did not find major empires, advanced civilizations, or gold. Ponce de Leon considered his exploration of the Peninsula of Florida a failure because he failed to find the Fountain of Youth, and De Soto, upon laying eyes on the great Mississippi, was discouraged and considered it only "another river to cross". Both had set their hearts on discovering great empires in the region, but found only hostile natives.

In many cases, the North American Indians did an effective job of massacring Spaniards and keeping foreigners out of their territories. [Tuscaloosa](#) was one of several native chiefs that made a name for themselves by fending off the Spaniards. That their resistance succeeded in leaving them unconquered for an additional three hundred years, however, had more to do with their lack of material wealth than their dauntless courage. Latin American tribes fought just as valiantly, but were ultimately overcome by endless hordes of treasure-seekers.

Characters—Exploration

PORTUGUESE EXPLORERS OF AFRICA/ASIA

<u>Prince Henry the Navigator</u>	1394–1460	Made improvements in navigation, ship building, map-making. Organized sailing expeditions along the coast of Africa.
<u>Alvise Cadamosto</u>	1432–1488	Early Portuguese explorer under Prince Henry the Navigator, who discovered Cape Verde and Gambia river.
<u>Bartholomew Diaz</u>	1450–1500	Discovered Cape of Good Hope at the southernmost point of Africa.
<u>Vasco da Gama</u>	1460–1524	Portuguese explorer who voyaged to Calicut, India by sailing around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.
<u>Francisco de Almeida</u>	1450–1510	Portuguese general who served in the wars against Granada, and was appointed the first governor of Portuguese India.
<u>Alfonso de Albuquerque</u>	1453–1515	Portuguese commander who won numerous naval conflicts in Asia and helped establish a colony in India at Goa.
<u>Fernando Mendes Pinto</u>	1509–1583	Portuguese explorer who wrote a book about his exploits in Ethiopia, the Arabian Sea, and Asia. Former Jesuit and friend of St. Francis Xavier.

SPANISH EXPLORERS OF THE NEW WORLD

<u>Christopher Columbus</u>	1451–1506	Genoan sailor, sponsored by Isabela of Spain, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean and discovered the Americas.
<u>Martin Alonso Pinzon</u>	1441–1493	Spanish navigator who sailed with Columbus on first voyage, but later feuded with him.
<u>Alonso de Ojeda</u>	1465–1515	Spanish conquistador who made several daring expeditions to the new world. Associate of Vespucci and Pizarro.
<u>Vasco Nunez Balboa</u>	1475–1519	Helped establish a Spanish colony in Panama and discovered the Pacific Ocean.
<u>Pedrarias Davila</u>	1440–1531	First Governor of the Spanish colony of Darien in Peru. Murderous and unscrupulous rival of Balboa.
<u>Amerigo Vespucci</u>	1451–1512	Navigator and map-maker who voyaged to Americas, and recognized it as a new continent, not east Asia.
<u>Ferdinand Magellan</u>	1480–1521	Portuguese explorer who commanded the first fleet to circumnavigate the globe. Died in Philippines.

NORTH AMERICA CONQUISTADORS

<u>Hernando Cortez</u>	1485–1540	Conquistador who landed in Mexico with a small army, and allied with local tribes, conquered the Empire of the Aztecs.
<u>Diego Velasquez</u>	1465–1524	Conquered Cuba for Spain, and was its first governor. First a supporter, then a rival of Cortez.
<u>Panfilo de Narvaez</u>	1478–1528	Spanish explorer who opposed Cortez, and later led a disastrous expedition to Florida of whom only 4 of 600 survived.
<u>Ponce de Leon</u>	1460–1521	First Spanish governor of Puerto Rico. Explored inland regions of Florida while searching for the fountain of youth.
<u>Hernando De Soto</u>	1496–1542	Adventurer who aided in conquest of Peru, then explored Southwestern United States. Discovered Mississippi river.
<u>Tuscaloosa</u>	d. 1540	Choctaw chieftain who resisted de Soto at the <i>Battle of Mauvila</i> during his expedition through the southwest.
<u>Francisco de Coronado</u>	1510–1554	Spanish explorer who was a governor in Mexico, and explored regions of the Southwest United States.

SOUTH AMERICA CONQUISTADORS

<u>Francisco Pizarro</u>	1478–1541	With only 160 men, conquered six thousand Inca and took control of Peru.
<u>Cabeza de Vaca</u>	1490–1557	Explorer who survived the ill-fated Narvaez expedition and captivity by Indians.

Timeline—Exploration

PORTUGUESE EXPLORATION OF AFRICA/ASIA

- 1420 Discovery of Madiera
- 1427 Discovery of the Azores
- 1441 Discovery of Cape Blanco
- 1456 [Alvise Cadamosto](#) reaches Cape Verde
- 1460 Death of [Prince Henry the Navigator](#)
- 1482 Diego Cao discovers the mouth of the Congo River
- 1488 [Bartholomew Diaz](#) doubles the Cape of Good Hope
- 1498 [Vasco da Gama](#) discovers a sea-route to India
- 1505 Zanzibar claimed for Portugal
- 1509 *Battle of Diu* sets up Portuguese hegemony in the Indian Ocean.
- 1512 [Alfonso de Albuquerque](#) founds the island of Goa for Portugal

SPANISH EXPLORATION OF NEW WORLD

- 1492 [Christopher Columbus](#) Discovers America
- 1493 First Settlement on Hispaniola (Dominican Republic)
- 1499 Second Voyage of Amerigo Vespucci
- 1510 Establishment of Colony at Darien (Balboa)
- 1511 Conquest of Cuba
- 1513 [Vasco Nunez Balboa](#) discovers the Pacific Ocean
- 1513 [Ponce de Leon](#) searches for the fountain of youth and discovers Florida
- 1519 [Hernando Cortez](#) conquers the Aztec empire, claims Mexico for Spain.
- 1519 [Ferdinand Magellan](#) embarks on first round-the-world voyage.
- 1532 [Francisco Pizarro](#) and de Soto conquer the Incas of Peru
- 1541 [Hernando De Soto](#) explores much of the Southeast U.S., discovers the Mississippi.

Recommended Reading—Exploration

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS

- Hutchinson - [The Men Who Found America](#) *entire book*
- Synge - [The Discovery of New Worlds](#) *Discovery of the New World to Conquest of Peru* (13)
- Morris - [Historical Tales: Spanish American](#) *Isles of Beauty to Coronado and Seven Cities* (9)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Imlach - [The Story of Columbus](#) *entire book*
- Duncan - [The Story of Sir Walter Raleigh](#) *entire book*
- Synge - [A Book of Discovery](#) *Henry of Portugal to Explorers in South America* (10)
- Ober - [Amerigo Vespucci](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Vasco Nunez de Balboa](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Pizarro and the Conquest of Peru](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Juan Ponce de Leon](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Ferdinand De Soto and the Invasion of Florida](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Hernando Cortes Conqueror of Mexico](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Columbus the Discoverer](#) *entire book*
- Ober - [Ferdinand Magellan](#) *entire book*