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## Exploration and Discovery

### The Significance of 1492

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The four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the New World was commemorated with a massive "Columbian Exhibition" in Chicago in 1893. The exhibition celebrated Columbus as a man of mythic stature, an explorer and discoverer who carried Christian civilization across the Atlantic Ocean and initiated the modern age.

The five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage of discovery was treated quite differently. Many peoples of indigenous and African descent identified Columbus with imperialism, colonialism, and conquest. The National Council of Churches adopted a resolution calling October 12th a day of mourning for millions of indigenous people who died as a result of European colonization.

More than five hundred years after the first Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean, historians and the general public still debate Columbus's legacy. Should he be remembered as a great discoverer who brought European culture to a previously unknown world? Or should he be condemned as a man responsible for an "American Holocaust," a man who brought devastating European and Asian diseases to unprotected native peoples, who disrupted the American ecosystem, and who initiated the Atlantic slave trade? What is Columbus's legacy--discovery and progress or slavery, disease, and racial antagonism?

To confront such questions, one must first recognize that the encounter that began in 1492 among the peoples of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres was one of the truly epochal events in world history. This cultural collision not only produced an extraordinary transformation of the natural environment and human cultures in the New World, it also initiated far-reaching changes in the Old World as well.

New foods reshaped the diets of people in both hemispheres. Tomatoes, chocolate, potatoes, corn, green beans, peanuts, vanilla, pineapple, and turkey transformed the European diet, while Europeans introduced sugar, cattle, pigs, cloves, ginger, cardamon, and almonds to the Americas. Global patterns of trade were overturned, as crops grown in the New World--including tobacco, rice, and vastly expanded production of sugar--fed growing consumer markets in Europe.

Even the natural environment was transformed. Europeans cleared vast tracks of forested land and inadvertently introduced Old World weeds. The introduction of cattle, goats, horses, sheep, and swine also transformed the ecology as grazing animals ate up many native plants and disrupted indigenous systems of agriculture. The horse, extinct in the New World for 10,000 years, transformed the daily existence of many indigenous peoples. The introduction of the horse encouraged many farming peoples to become hunters and herders. Hunters mounted on horses were also much more adept at killing game.

Death and disease - these too were consequences of contact. Diseases against which Indian peoples had no natural immunities caused the greatest mass deaths in human history. Within a century of contact, smallpox, measles, mumps, and whooping cough had reduced indigenous populations by 50 to 90 percent. From Peru to Canada, disease reduced the resistance that Native Americans were able to offer to European intruders.

With the Indian population decimated by disease, Europeans gradually introduced a new labor force into the New World: enslaved Africans. Between 1502 and 1870, when the Atlantic slave trade was finally suppressed, ten to fifteen million Africans were shipped to the Americas.

Columbus's voyage of discovery also had another important result; it contributed to the development of the modern concept of progress. To many Europeans, the New World seemed to be a place of innocence, freedom, and eternal youth. Columbus himself believed that he had landed near the Biblical Garden of Eden. The perception of the New World as an environment free from the corruptions and injustices of European life would provide a vantage point for criticizing all social evils. So while the collision of three worlds resulted in death and enslavement in unprecedented numbers, it also encouraged visions of a more perfect future.

The European voyages of discovery of the late fifteenth century played a critical role in the development of modern conceptions of progress. From the ancient Greeks onward, western culture tended to emphasize certain unchanging and universal ideas about human society. But the discovery of the New World threw many supposedly universal ideals into doubt. The Indians, who seemingly lived free from all the traditional constraints of civilized life--such as private property or family bonds--offered a vehicle for criticizing the corruptions, abuses, and restrictions of European society.

In 1516 the English humanist Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) published *Utopia*, his description of an ideal society where crime, injustice, and poverty did not exist. Writing just twenty-four years after Columbus's first voyage to the Caribbean, More located his perfect society in the Western Hemisphere. More's book, which is written in the form of a dialogue, pointedly contrasts the simplicity of life in Utopia with contemporary Europe's class divisions. In Utopia, property is held in common, gold is scorned, and all inhabitants eat the same food and wear the same clothes. And yet several features of More's Utopia strike a jarring note. For one thing, his book justifies taking land from the indigenous people because, in European eyes, they did not cultivate it. And secondly, the prosperity and well-being of More's ideal society ultimately rests on slave labor.

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