

Spain's Early Explorations

In the late 1400s, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain were determined to make their country a powerful force in Europe. One way to do this was to sponsor explorations and claim new lands for Spain.

Key Explorers It was Ferdinand and Isabella who sponsored the voyages of Christopher Columbus. The Italian-born Columbus thought that the Indies, or eastern Asia, lay on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He believed sailing west would be the easiest route to the Indies.

When Columbus failed to win Portuguese support for his idea, he turned to Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to pay for the risky voyage. They wanted to beat Portugal in the race to control the wealth of Asia. They also wanted to spread Christianity.

In August 1492, three ships left Spain under Columbus's command. For the crew, venturing into the open ocean was frightening. As the weeks went by, some of the men began to fear they would never see Spain again.

Then, on October 12, a lookout cried "Land!" Columbus went ashore on an island in the Caribbean Sea. Thinking he had reached the Indies, Columbus claimed the island for Spain.

For three months, Columbus and his men explored nearby islands with the help of native islanders, whom the Spanish called Taino. Thinking they were in the Indies, the Spanish soon called all the local people "Indians."

In March 1493, Columbus arrived back in Spain. He proudly reported that he had reached Asia. Over the next 10 years, he made three more voyages to what he called the West Indies. He died in Spain in 1506, still insisting that he had sailed to Asia.

Many Europeans, however, believed that Columbus had actually found a land mass that lay

between Europe and Asia. One of these people was Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer.

Magellan believed he could sail west to the Indies if he found a strait, or channel, through South America. The strait would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, allowing ships to continue on to Asia.

Magellan won Spain's backing for a voyage to find the strait. In August 1519, he set sail with five ships and about 250 men.

Magellan looked for the strait all along South America's east coast. He finally found it at the southern tip of the continent. Today it is called the Strait of Magellan.

After passing through the strait, Magellan reached the Pacific Ocean in November 1520. It took another three months to cross the Pacific. During the crossing, Magellan's men ran out of food and were plagued by disease and thirst. They reached an island in the western Pacific just in time.

Continuing west, Magellan visited the Philippines. There he became involved in a battle between two local chiefs. In April 1521, Magellan was killed in the fighting.

Magellan's crew sailed on to the Spice Islands. Three years after the expedition began, the only ship to survive the expedition returned to Spain, loaded with cloves. The 18 sailors on board were the first people to circumnavigate the globe.

The Impact of Early Spanish Exploration Early Spanish exploration changed Europeans' view of the world. The voyages of Columbus revealed the existence of the Americas. Magellan's expedition opened up a westward route to the Indies. It showed that it was possible to sail completely around the world. And it proved that Columbus had indeed found a "New World"—one they hadn't realized was there.

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Columbus's voyages were the beginning of Spanish settlement in the West Indies. Spain earned great wealth from its settlements. Settlers mined for precious minerals and started sugar plantations. The Spanish also sent Europe new crops, such as sweet potatoes and pineapples.

For the native people of the West Indies, Spanish settlement was devastating. Priests forced many of them to become Christians. Native people were forced to work as slaves in the mines and on the plantations. When the Spanish arrived, perhaps 1 or 2 million Taino lived on the islands. Within 50 years, fewer than 500 were left. The rest had died of starvation, overwork, or European diseases.

Like Portugal, Spain looked to West Africa for new sources of laborers. From 1518 through the mid 1800s, the Spanish brought millions of enslaved Africans to work in their American colonies.

Questions

1. What contributions did each of these individuals make to early Spanish exploration?
 - Christopher Columbus
 - Ferdinand Magellan
2. What impact did early Spanish exploration have on the people of these continents?
 - Europe
 - the Americas