Chapter 2: When World’s Collide, 1492–1590

Chapter Review

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES The English and the Algonquins at Roanoke

The lessons of Roanoke center on the missed opportunities of the English to capitalize on the potential alliances and friendly relationships with the Native peoples rather than seek to subjugate them and use them as laborers in grand schemes of economic and military success. Roanoke serves as a “template” for the settlements that would follow, particularly for understanding the underlying assumptions, behaviors, failures, and successes of the English attempts at colonization and community settlements.

1. THE EXPANSION OF EUROPE

Contact with, exploration of, and even brief settlement in North America took place long before Columbus’ first voyage. Yet, it was his voyages that had the most profound impact and consequences.

a. European Communities

Western Europe was an agricultural society undergoing rapid expansion. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, cultivated land more than doubled and the population tripled. Such rapid growth, however, also led to widespread epidemics (the most notable was the Black Death bubonic plague from 1347-1353), starvation, and death as the economic expansion remained concentrated in only a few hands. Advances in technology eventually mitigated some of these effects and resulted in a population of nearly 65 million by 1500.

b. The Merchant Class and the Renaissance

The economic growth fueled by agricultural expansion created the conditions for a parallel commercial expansion and the growth of markets and towns. The city-states of Italy were at the center of this commercial growth as they capitalized on the new trade routes to Asia. But economic expansion also led to the intellectual and technological growth of Europe, as exchanges with Asia and the Middle Eastern societies helped trigger an artistic and scientific revolution, marked by the growth in communication, universities, and new ideas such as humanism, collectively known as the Renaissance.

c. The New Monarchies

The Renaissance was also witness to the flowering of new political ideas, especially among the commoners and peasants. Conflicts within the noble classes and between the nascent states and the Catholic Church led to a series of political and social reforms that culminated in the formation of new centers of power. These new power centers were ruled over by monarchs who consolidated their hold on the landed gentry, the wealthy merchants, and control of the commoners through a joining of commercial and political power in the form of trading monopolies and contracts.

d. Portuguese Explorations

The Portuguese were the first and most adept at integrating the exploration and conquest of distant lands into their consolidated monarchial system. Prince Henry “the Navigator” was instrumental in the plan to establish a self-sufficient trading empire. Over the next two centuries Portugal incorporated new ideas and technology into their quest by creating faster and better-handling ships (the caravel) and new navigational techniques. Soon Portugal was in control of the Asian spice trade, access to the trade of the northwest African coast, the Atlantic islands of the Azores and Madeiras, and had already established trading centers in India. They also established the Atlantic slave trade system.

e. Columbus Reaches the Americas

Columbus’ “discovery” followed the consolidation of political and religious power in Spain. But his intent was not only to establish a commercial empire but also a physical empire by claiming the lands for Spain and setting up the necessary prerequisites for a lasting settlement and systematic colonization. As part of that larger plan, the Indians were viewed as the labor force to sustain the colonies. But Indian reluctance to play their “assigned” role and accept the European exploitation of their people led to outbreaks of resistance and war, which, when coupled with the impacts of disease and famine that resulted, decimated their populations. This had a negative effect on the Spanish colonies as well, sending them into economic depression and leading to Columbus’ recall.

1. THE SPANISH IN THE AMERICAS

The Spanish Empire was marked by imperial control. But the distance also led to a great deal of local autonomy. Despite the perception that the Spaniards carefully controlled their colonies and the people, the end result was a mixture of peoples, ideas, and customs.

a. The Invasion of America

Spanish control was facilitated by the establishment of the *encomienda* system in which Indians owed service to the Spanish and the profits were funneled back to Europe. The impact on the Indians, however, was depopulation as they were worked to death or killed for their unwillingness. The Spanish then began to reach out to new areas in order to secure more labor, including the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. By 1511 they also turned to the Central American mainland. In 1518 they made contact with the Aztecs and three years later, despite the overwhelming odds of conquering a people whose capitol alone held 200,000 people (making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time), the Spanish were successful in their conquest in the name of God and the quest for gold.

b. The Destruction of the Indies

Although the native peoples resisted, they were no match for the Spanish conquerors, their weapons, and unable to stave off the decimation of European diseases. This two-pronged destruction was quickly characterized as the “Black Legend” and protesters decried its barbarism, violence, wanton disregard for Indian life, and unmitigated greed. Bartolomé de las Casas was the most notable opponent of the Spanish method and his writing, *The Destruction of the Indies* was used by the enemies of Spain to denounce its actions. While there is little doubt that what de las Casas recorded was happening, it is clear to modern scholars that the Spanish could not have caused the degree of destruction through violence and warfare. Indeed, it was disease, massive epidemics, that was the major force in wiping out nearly 90 percent of all native peoples.

1. COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT

There were two competing views regarding the behavior of the Spanish toward the Indians. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda’s “On the Just Causes for War Against the Indians” (1547) touted the superiority of the Spanish and the just cause of conquering a lesser, uncivilized people. Contact with the Spanish, however harsh, he noted, was certain to be an uplifting experience for the Indian race. In contrast, Bartolomé de las Casas’ “In Defense of the Indians” laid bare the wanton disregard for life shown by the Spanish and decried their inability to recognize that the “whole human race is one.” He renounced Sepúlveda’s claims and noted that it was the duty of all Christians to treat those less able and less developed with compassion.

a. The Columbian Exchange

The large-scale exchange between the Old and New Worlds was a two-way exchange of disease, goods, plants, animals, and people. Europe gained precious metals, new crops such as maize, potatoes, tobacco, chocolate, and cotton. The native peoples of the Americas received sugar, rice, coffee, domesticated animals (most notably the horse), and devastating diseases. On the whole the exchange benefited the Europeans and was detrimental to the native North Americans. The cultural, social, and population destruction of the peoples of America was profound.

b. The First Europeans in North America

Spanish success in the New World was not foreordained. In fact, the earliest efforts were clear failures as both Ponce de Leon and Hernando de Soto made grand but ultimately thwarted attempts to secure the region for Spain. While Coronado’s explorations went farther than any previous attempt and was able to put down the resistance of the Pueblo peoples he encountered, the Spanish nonetheless remained less interested in the North American territories, disappointed in the lack of precious metals and advanced civilizations, and thus concentrated on the areas of the Caribbean, Central America and South America where they were already well entrenched.

c. The Spanish New World Empire

By 1599 there were nearly a quarter of a million Europeans in the New World and half as many Africans who were part of the Spanish and Portuguese plantation slave systems. The resulting society of Indians, Europeans, and Africans led to the development of a mestizo society where the peoples practiced ideas of inclusion. Spain had well-established urban trading centers including Santo Domingo, Havana, Mexico City, Quito and Lima. Although the Empire was ordered along the lines of a very strict and highly centralized bureaucratic system, run by the Council of the Indies in Madrid, it was in fact very decentralized and each region of the New World exercised a great deal of local control.

1. NORTHERN EXPLORATION AND ENCOUNTERS

The success of the Spanish, not surprisingly, attracted the attention of other European powers and quickly led to a prolonged competition for access, control, and wealth.

a. Fish and Furs

The fishing grounds of Nova Scotia had attracted European fisherman well before Columbus’ journeys. Both France and England sent explorers back to the region to investigate possible places for settlements, trade routes, and new goods. Jacques Cartier explored deep into the interior of North America and initiated the trade in furs, which for the next three centuries was a dominant factor in the European and North American connections. The French found willing trade partners among the Indians of Canada and the Great Lakes region so long as they did not attempt massive settlements. But the trade itself created conflict between Indian tribes as they contested access to hunting grounds, and increasingly grew dependent on European goods. Ultimately the French set up settlements and sought to monopolize the fur trade.

b. The Protestant Reformation and the First French Colonies

Events in Europe continued to have an impact on the development and direction of the colonial outposts in the Americas. The Protestant Reformation, initially a quest to reform, but ultimately a rejection of the authority, power, and theological tenets of the Catholic Church, resulted in a series of divisive conflicts that pushed many Europeans toward the perceived refuge of the New World. The first French settlers were one such group, the Huguenots, who sought to set up a religious outpost in the present-day American South. But Spanish opposition to such an intrusion led to armed conflict, a massacre of the Huguenots and a concerted effort by the Spanish to resecure their possession through newly built forts, reinforced garrisons, and a stated policy to eliminate all future incursions.

c. Sixteenth-Century England

Social change in England also spurred migration to the New World. As the landless farming community found themselves constrained by the expansion of the enclosure movement and the urban centers became increasingly crowded, the common people looked to the New World as an outlet. The Protestant Reformation, signaled by the rejection of Catholicism and the establishment of the Church of England, also resulted in persistent religious conflicts from which many sought refuge. Queen Elizabeth turned to the leading merchants and military leaders of the era to secure her position by suppressing and defeating the Irish Catholics. The “wild Irish” were seen as savages and less than human, an idea that would shape future English encounters with other peoples, particularly in the New World.

d. Early English Efforts in the Americas

Richard Haklyut was the leading advocate for a policy that advocated the use of privateers and commercial trade to outdo the Spanish and granting the military and economic supporters of the monarch special rights and privileges that carried over into the New World. Haklyut argued that the New World represented a safety valve for the social unrest, allowing England to populate the territories with the unwanted and disaffected. Colonial outposts would also allow England to free itself from reliance on the Asian trade and create new, essential markets. Thus began the quest to establish a permanent presence, the first attempt being the Roanoke experiment. As with the French intrusion, Spain attempted to eradicate the English expansion, but failed in an ill-fated effort to destroy the British fleet in 1588.

1. EXPLORING AMERICA

a. Exploitation of the Americas

What methods and practices did the Spanish have to employ in order to conquer the native peoples they encountered? In particular, this module looks at the Spanish perceptions of the Indians, how they planned to use them as a part of their quest for economic expansion, and by what methods they achieved their objectives of a New World empire.

Chapter Resources at a Glance

**Maps**

Western Europe in the Fifteenth Century (plus outline and interactive map on CD-ROM)

**Visual Sources**

Tres Riches Heures

Astrolabe

Caravel

Columbus’ Voyage

**Maps**

The Invasion of America (plus outline and interactive map on CD-ROM)

European Exploration (plus outline and interactive map on CD-ROM)

**Visual Sources**

Tenochtitlan

Cruelties Used by the Spanish on the Indians

Florentine Codex

Rene de Loudonniere and Chief Athore

The French land at the mouth of the St. John’s River

The Armada Portrait of Elizabeth I

Woman and Child of Pomelooc

**Charts**

North America’s Indian and Colonial Populations in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The African, Indian, and European Populations of the Americas

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to explain:

1. The various European events and social changes that determined the course of colonization and development in the New World.

2. The origins and different perceptions of the Native Americans held by the Europeans.

3. The destructiveness of the encounters and “Columbian Exchange” upon the Native Americans.

4. The positive and negative benefits of colonization upon the European communities.

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. It has been said that the Europeans would not have been successful in their colonization had it not been for the unintended consequences of the spread of disease and epidemics. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

**Answer:** There is no question that disease was the single largest factor in eliminating the presence of Native Americans throughout the continents of the Americas. Many Indian societies lost upwards of ninety percent of their populations, oftentimes without even directly encountering Europeans. Rarely were the Europeans able to levy such heavy casualties on the Indians as a result of war that could even come close to matching the destruction wrought by disease.

1. What were the European factors and developments that led to their ability and desire to explore, expand, and settle in the New World?

**Answer:** Economic and political consolidation fueled by success in trade to Asia and the Middle East as well as the incorporation of Africa into their sphere of influence. Scientific advances also played a central role in allowing the seafarers to travel further, faster, and with more certainty of success.

1. How and why did the Spanish, French, and English attempts at settlement differ?

**Answer:** Each nation settled in different regions of the New World, with the Spanish taking possession of vast tracts, as authorized by the Papal declaration in the Treaty of Tordesillas. The Spanish came with the full intent of exploitation and settlement often was a premeditated action, engaging in frontiers of inclusion out of need and relying on the native peoples for labor. The French and English were almost “accidental” colonizers, slowly entering into their respective regions first by means of trade and small settlements and eventually by being enticed by new goods—furs and tobacco as opposed to the Spanish quest for gold.

Lecture Outline

The Expansion of Europe

Characteristics of European Communities

Joining of the Merchant Class and Monarchies

Cultural and Political Renaissance

Portuguese Explorations

Prince Henry and Science/Technological Advances

Asia and Africa

Advent of the Slave Trade

Columbus’s “Discovery”

Spanish Political Consolidation

First Voyage and discoveries

Political and Economic Advances

Later Voyages and Colonization

Vespucci and *Novus Mundo*

Spanish in America

God, Gold, and Glory

Invasion and Conquest

The “Black Legend”

Intercontinental/“Columbian” Exchange

A New World Empire

European Competition

French Exploration and Settlement

English Efforts at Exploitation

Unsuccessful Colonies: Huguenots and Roanoke

Resources (Web, Films/Video)

**Web**

*1492: An Ongoing Voyage:* <http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/1492.exhibit/Intro.html> is an online exhibit from the Library of Congress that examines the multiple dimensions of the world from which Columbus sailed, the world to which he traveled, and the world from which the slave labor was drawn to sustain the development of New World Empires.

*Myth and Reality: The Legacy of Spain in America:* [http://www.freerepublic.com/forum/ a39d38e0d14db.htm](http://www.freerepublic.com/forum/%20a39d38e0d14db.htm) from the Institute of Hispanic Culture of Houston, this site provides a reliable compilation of the scholarly research that has been conducted on the Black Legend.

*A Treasure Trove of North American Exploration:* <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/2/8/>   
from the National Library of Canada, shows that the exploration of North America was really a long, arduous process that took place over more than four centuries of exploration, from the arrival of the first Europeans to the discovery of the Northwest Passage.

*American Memory: Discovery and Exploration:* [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/ dsxphome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/%20dsxphome.html) documents the discovery and exploration of the Americas through manuscripts and maps dating from the late 15th century to the 17th century and even later 18th and 19th century maps documenting the exploration and mapping of the continental interiors.

**Films/Video**

*1492: Conquest of Paradise* (154 mins.) Paramount, 1992. Covers the twenty-three year span of Columbus’s initial efforts to secure financing through to his last voyage and death, ending with his legacy being carried on by his son.

*The Mission* (126 mins.), Enigma Productions, 1986. Eighteenth-century Spanish Jesuit efforts to establish missions among the Guarani Indians of Brazil and their subsequent efforts to protect them the consequences of domination by pro-slavery Portugal.

*Trading Empires in the New World* (1 min.) on CD-ROM. Provides a brief discussion of the development of world trading empires and the conflicts that developed as a result.

Instructor’s Resources (Available on CD-ROM)

**Additional Photos**

Columbus Taking Possession of a New Country

Petri de Calyce’s Cruelty to the Indians

Raleigh’s Expedition at Roanoke

**Biographies**

Virginia Dare

de Las Casas

Primary Sources

Christopher Columbus, *Letter to Luis de Sant Angel* (1493); (with Audio Clip and Transcript)

Henry VII, *First Letters Patent Granted to John Cabot and His Sons* (1496)

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Indians of the Rio Grande* (1528–1536)

Jacques Cartier: *First Contact with the Indians* (1534); (with Audio Clip and Transcript)

Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Of the Island of Hispanola* (1542)

Thomas Harriot, *The Algonquin Peoples of the Atlantic Coast* (1588); (with Audio Clip and Transcript)

Critical Thinking Exercises

Students should be assigned readings that speak to the Native American rationales for permitting and assisting and resisting the European settlements. Often times the same tribes and groups engaged in different responses to the Europeans over time and depending upon the changing circumstances. What did Native Americans have to gain by being cooperative?