

# THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

At the close of our last volume in this series, we said farewell to what is commonly called the Middle Ages. We learned that this time period is often called the Dark Ages, although I personally agree with many historians who argue that this time period was no culturally darker than any other era of history. Perhaps it seems darker because the culture of the Middle Ages was not as intellectually driven as the ancient centuries that contained the great Greek and Roman Empires. Those cultures were known for philosophy, human advancement, and monumental growth in art, technology, and science, while those “middle” centuries did not see as many advances in these areas. Perhaps they are called the Dark Ages because it was during this time period that Europe and Asia were dealing with a silent, deadly killer: the bubonic plague. This horrible sickness spread like a black fog, engulfing both rich and poor with its insidious cloud of death.

As the Black Plague subsided across Europe, there was growth in prosperity and education, and a new interest in discovery and exploring more of the world. Around the middle of the 14th century, Europe experienced a cultural rebirth of sorts. The Renaissance (old French for “rebirth”) completely changed not only the world of art, but it also served as a catalyst for new growth and discovery in the fields of science and invention. As the world culture grew and advanced, so did the interest in expansion and colonization.

You may be familiar with the stories of the Viking explorer Leif Erickson, who accidentally and unknowingly stumbled across North America at the place now called Nova Scotia, Canada. Although he didn’t know he was on a “new” continent, he is considered to be the first European to come to the Americas. Unfortunately, his visit here was not formally recorded, and the stories of his discovery were mostly thought of as fairy tales.

Likewise, most of us are extremely familiar with the stories of brave Christopher Columbus who sailed “past the edge of the earth” and landed on San Salvador instead of the Indies, but Columbus was not the only explorer of this time period to set sail from European ports. In fact, there were many other explorers from other continents who



16th century portrait of  
Christopher Columbus



Illustration of Diogo Cão and his men erecting a cross in Africa

Portuguese padrão (stone monument) placed in Namibia in the 1400s, commemorating Diogo Cão's explorations.

had ventured out of their familiar waters to investigate and explore the unknown parts of the world.

The Portuguese were the leaders in true exploration during the 1400s. If you were with me in the previous volume in this series, you may remember the story about Prince Henry of Portugal, who was called “the Navigator.” Prince Henry had such an interest in navigation that he started a school to teach the Portuguese sailors of the day how to use the newest navigational inventions. Although Henry himself never went on a great exploratory sea voyage, his contribution to the science of navigation put Portugal in the lead for exploration.

At this point in history, most European sailing was taking place in familiar waters. Portuguese explorers Diogo Cão, Bartolomeu Dias, and Vasco da Gama sailed up and down the west coast of Africa, each one venturing a little farther. Cão is credited for being the first European to discover the mouth of the Congo River in Africa, which he claimed for Portugal in 1482, as well as establish trading posts in Indonesia. Dias was the first European to lead an expedition around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. Vasco da Gama's voyages to India in the years



1497 through 1499 gave Portugal trade routes in Africa and the Indies by way of the Cape. Unfortunately, these claims and trading posts also helped lead to the nasty business of slave trading, especially in Africa. We will discuss this in depth in our next chapter.

These routes were extremely important to the European countries because they did not have the same resources as their neighboring continents. These European explorers sought ivory from African elephant tusks, silk from China, and spices, such as pepper, cloves, and nutmeg, from the Indies and the nearby Molucca Islands, as the most precious and expensive resources in trading. Spices were especially precious at this time in history. Because there were no refrigerators or freezers, there was no good way to preserve meat besides smoking it. Spices were used to disguise the horribly nasty taste of rancid meat. Black pepper was also rare and precious. It was this spice trade that would instigate the race to find a sea route to the East. Surely there had to be a faster way to get to India and the islands where the spices grew! Whoever could get there the fastest would make the most money in the spice trade (Fry 2010, 157).

While we are learning about the explorations of this age, it's important to remember that maps of this time period looked much different than today's maps. As explorers sailed increasingly farther outside of their familiar waters, they discovered lands and people they didn't even know were there. As they discovered more geographically, maps changed to reflect that. You will find more information about the view of the earth and its place in the universe in the Connect! section of this chapter.

### NARRATION BREAK:

Why did the Portuguese have the lead in exploration? Explain why spices were so precious.



19th or early 20th century ivory warehouse. Ivory remained a popular African import for centuries.

# CONNECT

I have in my possession, a book with illustrations of very old maps... maps so old, in fact, they do not show the gigantic continents that cover much of the western half of the globe. It may seem funny to us because we have seen so many globes and world maps which show tiny details gathered from images taken from space-traveling satellites. However, during the time period we are studying, there was only guessing at what exactly covered the earth. In the 15th century, geographers believed that there were a few islands perhaps in the western waters between Europe and Africa, and China, Japan, and the much sought-after Spice Islands. They still used and respected world maps drawn by Ptolemy (the Greek geographer I mentioned in the chapter) more than a thousand years before. These geographers never dreamed that there were huge land masses, rich in more natural resources than they could ever imagine!



Jan Matejko's *Astronomer Copernicus, Conversation with God*, 1872



Johannes Vermeer's *The Geographer*, 1669

It was also around this period of history that astronomers were studying the sky in ways they had never been able to before. Their conclusion that our planet was not the center of the universe was earth-shattering. Although it took some convincing that the universe really doesn't revolve around us, this new knowledge changed more than just how people looked at the stars — it changed how they perceived everything. In an upcoming chapter, we will learn more about these changes and how they affected the world culture.

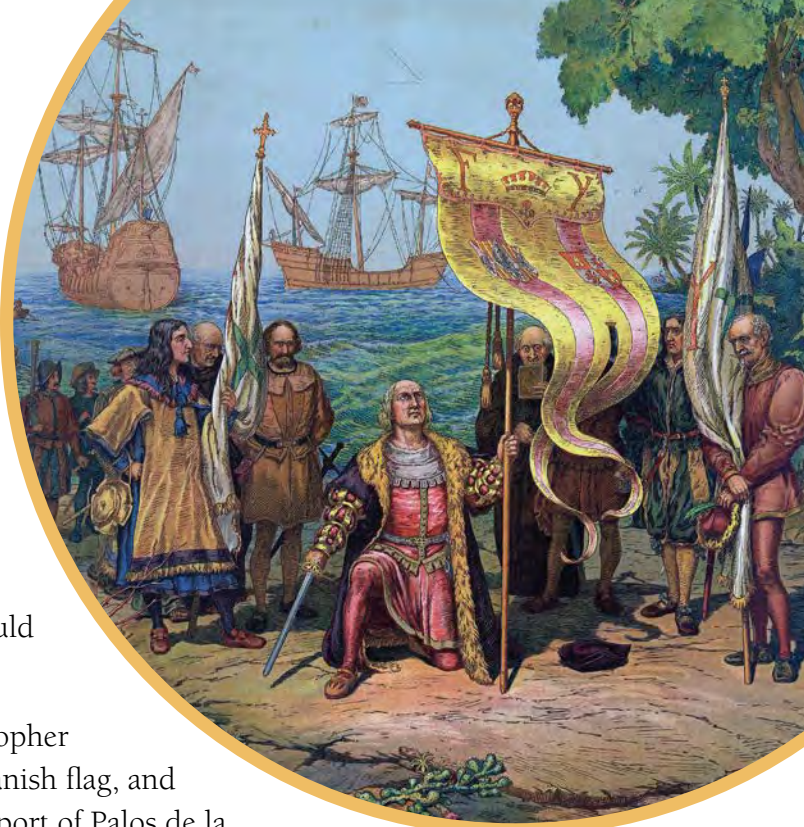
Even in the early to mid-15th century, superstition and fear of the unknown still ruled much of the population. Perhaps you could sail off the edge of the world. Whoever was going to discover the eastern route to the Indies would have to be brave enough to face uncharted water, monsters of the deep, and quite possibly a watery grave. They would have to be brave enough to sail away from the comfort of familiar waters into whatever was ahead. Would they have enough food and water? Would their navigational instruments be able to bring them back home? Would they ever see their loved ones again?

It was this stack of odds and unknowns that Christopher Columbus, an Italian explorer sailing under the Spanish flag, and his crew faced when they sailed out of the Spanish port of Palos de la Frontera on August 3, 1492. Their three ships, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, were not very large and were loaded down with all of the provisions that they could carry. The Santa Maria was the flagship and was slower and heavier than the other two ships.

On October 12, after more than two months at sea, Columbus and his crew landed on the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas. When he saw the dark complexion of the island inhabitants, Columbus was convinced that he had succeeded in finding the ocean route to the Indies. He called these people Indians and claimed their island for Spain. Columbus would go on to complete four exploratory voyages to this “New World,” though as we’ll learn in the next chapter, it wasn’t new to everyone. Each one of his voyages was spent searching for the riches and spices of the Indies.

Columbus never knew that he had actually landed on the continent mentioned in the Viking fables of five centuries before, and he never found the riches he sought so fervently. Sadly, he died at the age of 54, never knowing it was his explorations that had established European influence on the New World. After Columbus, explorers from all over Europe came to explore and claim large tracts of land throughout the New World.

It was the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan who first sailed to the East by traveling west around the world. Like Columbus, Magellan believed that he could find a passage to the Spice Islands by traveling west. Sponsored by Charles I of Spain, Magellan set out to cross the Atlantic. It was 1519. Like Columbus, Magellan came to the islands off of the northern coast of South America. Here, he turned his fleet of five ships south and sailed for what seemed an eternity, working his way down the coast of the giant continent of South America, until finally he came to a passageway that seemed to cut east through the continent. He had discovered the stormy passage that



19th century illustration of Columbus arriving in the Americas



Portrait of Ferdinand Magellan

Philip Galle's 16th century depiction of Magellan sailing around the world

is now called the “Strait of Magellan.” You can see by looking at a map that the Strait of Magellan really doesn’t cut off all that much from the distance of a voyage around the tip of South America, but Magellan didn’t know this! On he sailed, and in 1521, he arrived in the Philippine Islands. He had proved that you could sail west and reach the East. Sadly, Magellan himself was killed in the Philippines, but his crew sailed on home to Spain.

In the area that is now central and southern Mexico, there ruled a rather fierce, warring tribe of people. These were the Aztecs. If you studied Volume 2 of this series, you may remember these early Americans. We learned that although they were advanced in mathematics and architecture, building splendid pyramids, temples, and palaces, the Aztecs were also highly feared by their neighbors. You see, the Aztecs believed that they had to keep Huitzilopochtli, their false sun god, happy — by “feeding” him human sacrifices. Many of their conquests were centered around finding offerings for this false god.

The Aztec empire was growing stronger and stronger throughout the 1400s and early 1500s. Then, in 1519, Spanish explorer and soldier Hernan Cortes arrived in the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan and captured the Aztec emperor, Montezuma.



19th century Spanish painting illustrates Cortes' arrival in the Americas



Illustration of Atahualpa, the last Inca emperor, 1800s

In 1521, the Aztecs revolted against Cortes' men, but the Spaniards had horses and guns, both of which the Aztecs had never seen before. Montezuma was killed, Tenochtitlan was destroyed, and the Aztecs fell to the Spaniards. Cortes became the governor of Mexico and claimed the area for Spain.

To the south of the Aztec Empire, down on the western coast of South America, was the mighty Inca Empire. In our previous volumes in this series, we learned about this civilization and their lofty citadel fortress, Machu Picchu, high in the Andes Mountains. In 1531, two adventurers from Spain who had previously settled in Panama in Central America, Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro, led an expedition to Peru, where the Incas lived. They had 180 men and 37 horses with which they attacked the Incas. They captured the Incan ruler, conquered the capital city of Cusco, and in 1535, established a new capital city, Lima.



This artwork shows Diego de Almagro. He and Pizarro conquered the Inca.



Depiction of Coronado and his conquistadors

These ambitious, and often cruel, fame and fortune-seeking Spanish explorers were called conquistadors (con-KEY-sta-dors), and they made their marks on various parts of North, Central, and South America. Unfortunately, the Conquistadors were oftentimes exceptionally unfair and dishonorable in their dealings with the natives of the beautiful land of the New World. Their military prowess and superior weapons gave them great advantage over the native warriors they encountered. Sadly, the cultures of these indigenous people groups were often completely devastated by the conquistadors' treatment.

The Spanish explorers and conquistadors did not limit their claims and conquests to Central and South America; they also explored what is now the continental United States. Juan Ponce de Leon was a conquistador who may have traveled with Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. He went on to conquer and claim Puerto Rico for Spain, as well as becoming the governor there. A native woman told him about the magical lands they called Bimini, where there was a Fountain of Youth. De Leon went in search of the mythical fountain but instead stumbled across Florida in 1513 and claimed it for Spain.

Another conquistador, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, became the first European to see the Grand Canyon in 1540, when he led expeditions through what is now





Frederic Remington's *Coronado Sets Out to the North*, 1800s

Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma, which he claimed for Spain. Although he was actually looking for El Dorado — a fabled city built entirely of gold — Hernando de Soto is believed to be the first European to cross the Mississippi River. His expedition, in 1539–42, took him into the heart of what is now the United States.

### NARRATION BREAK:

Who was the first European explorer to circumnavigate the globe? What strait is named after him?

## NEW TO KNOW

- › The natives of the American continents were descendants of the people who came after the dispersion of people at the Tower of Babel.
- › In the year Coronado led his expedition through what is now the southwestern part of the United States, King Henry VIII was still on the throne in England. His rule ended about seven years later in January of 1547.



This picture depicts Hernando de Soto discovering the Mississippi River.



## SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE EXPLORATIONS

- Columbus, 1st voyage
- Dias
- da Gama
- Magellan
- Pizarro
- Cortes

As these maps show, the Spanish and Portuguese explorers traveled far and wide during this time period. There were numerous reasons why the explorers ventured into these lands that they had previously not known about, but expanding their country's wealth and land-holdings were key motivators. These lands that were new to them were often incredibly rich in resources. Sometimes, the explorers conquered these lands that they explored, and at other times, they tried to establish trade or just passed through.

**ANALYZE** Can you find the Strait of Magellan you read about in the chapter on the map? Where is it?

**CONNECT** Why do you think the explorers didn't always conquer a country that they discovered?

Beginning in the early 17th century, Spanish missions were established in Latin America and throughout what is now the southwest section of the United States. The missions along the west coast of North America were built in strategic places to help control the native population and keep the nearby Russians from trying to move in. The Spanish knew that if they did not convert the Indians and bring them under their control, there would be no chance of holding onto the land.

The Jesuits, an order of priests, who had come from Spain over the last century to establish missions in the New World, had been removed by the king of Spain. Their missions stood empty and abandoned, a weak spot in the line of defense against the Russians to the north. The Franciscan monks had been told to take over the missions. Junipero Serra was one of these monks.

Father Serra came to the mission at the port of San Diego in 1769. Although he was a short, rather sickly man, his large personality made up for it. Serra was a professor before becoming a monk and volunteering for this mission in the New World. He had spent years working with the natives of Mexico and lived by the motto, "Always go forward and never turn back." It was Serra who officiated at the founding of San Diego. His treatment of the natives was cruel; he forced them to convert, and once they were baptized, they were under the authority of the Church (Graves "Junipero Serra" 2010).

These missions were strategic in the Spanish maintaining control in the New World, and although there may have been sincere Christians who came to reach the natives for Christ, I have a hard time associating them with anything but political power and gain. This is not how the Bible teaches Christians to act or how it teaches us to win souls for Christ. Sadly, because of the mishandling of the gospel, many souls were lost. It saddens me that this was the first experience that these Native Americans had with the name of Jesus or His church. I am so very thankful that God saw every single misdeed done in His name. He is the just and righteous Judge.



Léon Troussel's *Father Serra Celebrates Mass at Monterey, 1877*. This painting depicts a service that Serra conducted approximately a century earlier.





## CUZCO, PERU

Cuzco, Peru (sometimes also spelled Cusco) was the capital of the Inca Empire. It remains an important regional center in modern Peru and is full of relics of its Incan and colonial Spanish past.



One of the most famous sites in the city is the Plaza de Armas, a town square. In the Inca days, it was called the "Square of the Warrior." It also was the site where Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro declared the city defeated. Most of the remaining architecture that still stands in the square today is from the Spanish.



Sacsayhuamán was not renovated by the Spanish. This fortress sits high atop a hill in the city of Cuzco and was built by the Killke culture, which controlled the area before the Inca. It was then later developed even further by the Inca.



There are numerous Inca ruins outside Cuzco. One of the most famous is Pisac. This area was a major agricultural site for the Inca. It is also famous for the colorful traditional textiles the residents created.



One of the hallmarks of Spanish colonial architecture, which can be seen in Cuzco and across Peru, is the presence of balconies. One of the most distinctive attractions when visiting Cuzco is the many balconies that jut over the street.

The Coricancha during Inca times was a center for worship. Under the Spanish, it was converted into a Catholic church. This was a common practice among the Spanish. The older Incan structure was used as a base while the newer building itself reflected Spanish architectural styles.