

The European Voyages of Exploration: The Caribbean: First Contact

The Caribbean was one of the first regions of European expansion into the Americas during the Age of Exploration. Christopher Columbus's 1492 expedition, sponsored by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, took him to places such as modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The colonies discovered by Columbus in the Caribbean generated enormous wealth and power for the Spanish empire, which would enjoy overseas supremacy until the late sixteenth century. Although Columbus had intended to locate a new route to the Far East, his discovery of a "new" world sparked a new phase in world history. European exploration, starting with Spain and Portugal, would continue to increase in size and strength over the course of the following centuries, as exploration transformed into conquest and colonization. Colonization in the Caribbean became an extremely lucrative endeavor well into the eighteenth century. The production of sugar, in particular, provided European states with incredible wealth, which allowed them to continue to build their global empires. Imperial presence in the Caribbean and the Americas also led to the transatlantic slave trade and the massive enslavement of Africans in order to accommodate the growing demand for luxury goods—such as sugar, coffee, rum, and chocolate—back in Europe.

Motivations behind European Expansion

Spanish settlement in the Caribbean was largely centered on the island of Hispaniola, which today is divided into the states of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The early Caribbean expeditions led by Columbus encapsulate the two primary aspects of European imperialism. The first involved economic incentives, which were a major feature of the Portuguese style of expansion. With this type of expansion, figures such as Christopher Columbus viewed global exploration as a means to a mercantile end. The goal was to create trading centers at strategic locations throughout the world. Under this commercial type of expansion, Europeans expected to utilize many types of native resources and to establish colonial outposts that would require minimal funding, infrastructure, and colonists.

The other style of European imperialism clashed with the objectives of the Portuguese style of commercial imperialism. This militant and aggressive variety of colonialism came out of the kingdom of Castile, which would join the kingdom of Aragon in the late fifteenth century to become the kingdom of Spain. Highly influenced by the culture of the medieval Crusades and the victory of the Reconquista in the 1490s, the Spanish model of expansion involved invading, conquering, and settling on new lands. As opposed to creating small commercial posts with a few people to manage them, the Spanish conquistadors (adventurers/warriors who led the expeditions into the New World) sought to establish colonial communities for long-term settlement. The glaring differences between the commercial and colonial style of expansion often led to conflict and hostility among European conquistadors who envisioned a specific version of how the Spanish empire ought to look.

Conquest in the Caribbean

In the context of Spanish imperialism and colonization, the militant variety of European expansion prevailed. The Spanish model would influence future European states in their style of colonization in the Caribbean and the Americas. As one of the first sites of discovery, Spanish conduct in the Caribbean provides an example of the typical Spanish structure of colonization. Spanish conquistadors, after locating a new territory, would first assess the local people and resources to determine their potential degree of profitability. Conquistadors were known to exhibit appalling behavior toward indigenous populations, ranging from stealing natives' food and gold to rape and mass killings. An unintentional cause of death came from Europeans' own biological composition. Men coming over from the Old World carried diseases, such as smallpox, which devastated indigenous populations in the New World, who had never come into contact with affected peoples.

The few instances of native rebellion against the Spanish resulted in bloodshed and severe punishment. An attempt in Hispaniola to defeat the Spanish resulted in gunfire, slaughter, and captivity. Europeans had access to newer technologies, which allowed them to use muskets and other newer weapons as tools to subjugate native peoples. After the Spanish suppressed a potential uprising, they would force members of the indigenous population to pay tributes and to undertake the very dangerous task of mining for gold.

The Quest for Gold

In order to achieve enough funds for an overseas expedition, conquistadors were required to find sponsors and investors who would finance these voyages. These investors intended to redeem their investments after the end of a successful voyage, which put a substantial amount of pressure on the conquistadors to discover riches in the New World. This led to an obsessive search for gold deposits throughout the Caribbean (later on, the Spanish would be similarly preoccupied with looking for silver in Latin America). After discovering gold deposits, the Spanish needed to acquire laborers who could mine it. Spain introduced the *encomienda* system to the Caribbean settlements as a way to regulate the colonies, but also to acquire free labor to mine for gold. The Spanish government provided conquistadors with land grants throughout the Caribbean, and natives to work the land. The landowners were appointed a certain number of indigenous peoples to protect and care for. In exchange for this "protection," native laborers were required to supply labor for their landlords. Over time, the *encomienda* became a system of slavery and exploitation.

After the Spanish depleted the gold deposits, the conquistadors moved throughout the Caribbean repeating the entire process that they had established in Hispaniola. From 1508 to 1511, the Spanish occupied and subjugated Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. Indigenous populations in all of these territories faced the pattern of conquest, settlement, exploitation of resources and labor, subjugation, and finally the withdrawal of strict oversight as the Europeans continued on to explore new lands that could provide more gold and silver. It was this zealous hunt for gold that drove the

Spanish conquistadors throughout Latin America, where they would vanquish the Aztec and Incan Empires, just as they had done to the people in the Caribbean.

