

The Columbian Exchange

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The combination of the Portuguese colonization of Atlantic islands and Christopher Columbus's landing in Hispaniola in the 1400s inaugurated an era of aggressive European expansion throughout the Atlantic. This age of exploration and the subsequent creation of a more interconnected world meant that previously isolated groups—Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans—increasingly came into contact with each other, sometimes with disastrous results.

This tutorial examines the effects of increased interaction between the Old and the New World in two parts. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. A New Era of Globalization

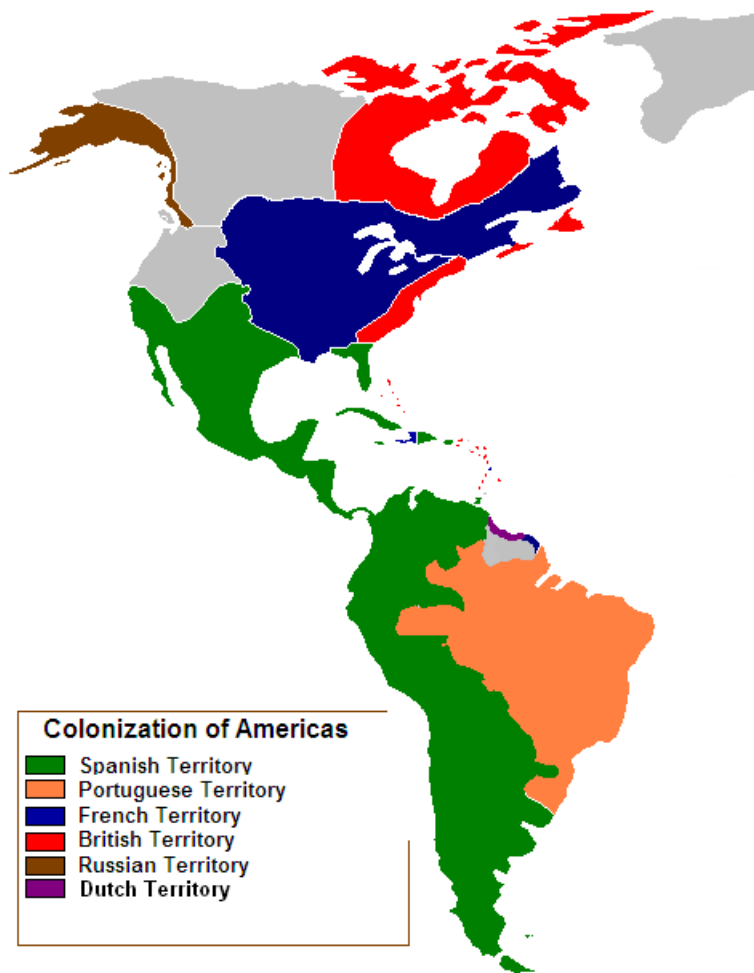
Today, many Americans take for granted the fact that they live in a “globalized,” or an increasingly interconnected, world and economy. **Globalization** is not a new phenomenon. It emerged when Western Europeans discovered the riches of the East during the Crusades (1095–1291). Yet, when the Silk Road and other overland trade routes between Europe, the Middle East, and China became costlier and more dangerous to travel, Europeans searched for more efficient and inexpensive trade routes over water. Europeans had developed an appetite for spices, silk, porcelain, sugar, and other luxury items from the East, and the opening of Atlantic trade routes by the Portuguese and the Spanish provided an opportunity to satisfy these appetites. Thus, the processes of globalization accelerated with the winds and sails of ships in the Atlantic.



TERM TO KNOW

Globalization

The ever-increasing interconnectedness of the world.



As oceanic trade routes to the East became increasingly dominated by the Portuguese (and later the Dutch), other European powers followed the Spanish example of colonizing the Americas. European promoters of **colonization** claimed the Americas overflowed with a wealth of treasures. Burnishing national glory and honor became entwined with carving out colonies, and no nation wanted to be left behind. This led to a general land grab on the part of the great European Empires. Following in the footsteps of the Portuguese and Spanish, the British, Danish, Dutch, French, and Russians set out to establish a foothold in the New World.



TERM TO KNOW

Colonization

The governing control one nation has over another's economy, labor, geography, politics, and so on. The consolidation of political power among several strong monarchies in Europe, the perceived need to spread the Christian faith throughout the world, and a desire for raw materials to sell in European markets were the driving factors behind European colonization. During the age of European exploration, nations used conquest, colonization, and trade to increase their share of the bounty of the New World.

Political, religious, and economic competition between European empires resulted in a process of colonization and exploitation in the Americas that required several factors:

- colonies rich in raw materials,
- cheap labor,
- colonial loyalty to the home government, and
- control of the shipping trade.

Under this system, New World colonies grew and harvested raw materials and sent them to their mother country. The mother country returned finished products, such as textiles, tools, and clothing. The colonists could only purchase these goods from their mother country; trade with other countries was forbidden. During the 1500s and early 1600s, Europeans also introduced the process of **commodification** to the New World. American silver, tobacco, and other items, which were used by Native people for ritual purposes, became European commodities that were assigned monetary values and bought and sold.



TERM TO KNOW

Commodification

The transformation of something—for example, an item of ritual significance—into a commodity with monetary value.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Inca people of the Andes consumed chicha, a corn beer, for ritual purposes. When the Spanish discovered chicha, they bought and traded for it, turning it into a commodity. Commodification thus recast Native economies and spurred the growth of early commercial capitalism. New World resources, from plants to animal pelts, held the promise of wealth for European imperial powers.

2. The Columbian Exchange

As Europeans traversed the Atlantic, they brought with them plants, animals, and diseases that changed lives and landscapes on both sides of the ocean. These two-way exchanges between the Americas and Europe/Africa are known collectively as the **Columbian Exchange**. With European exploration and settlement of the New World, goods and diseases began crossing the Atlantic Ocean in both directions. The Columbian Exchange soon had global implications.



TERM TO KNOW

Columbian Exchange

The movement of plants, animals, and diseases across the Atlantic due to European exploration of the Americas.



Of all the commodities in the Atlantic World, sugar proved to be the most important. Indeed, sugar carried the same economic importance as oil does today. European rivals raced to create sugar plantations in the Americas and fought wars for control of some of the best sugar production areas. Although refined sugar was available in the Old World, Europe's harsher climate made sugarcane difficult to grow, so it was not plentiful.

Columbus brought sugar to Hispaniola in 1493, and the new crop was growing there by the end of the 1490s. By the first decades of the 1500s, the Spanish were building sugar mills on the island. Over the next century of colonization, Caribbean islands and most other tropical areas became centers of sugar production.

Though of secondary importance to sugar, tobacco also achieved great value for Europeans as a cash crop. Native peoples had grown it for medicinal and ritual purposes for centuries before European contact, smoking it in pipes or powdering it to use as snuff. They believed tobacco improved concentration and enhanced wisdom. To some, its use meant achieving an entranced, altered, or divine state; it meant entering a spiritual place.

Tobacco was unknown in Europe before 1492, and it carried a negative stigma at first. The early Spanish explorers considered Native peoples' use of tobacco to be proof of their savagery and, because of the fire and smoke produced in the consumption of tobacco, evidence of the Devil's sway in the New World. Gradually, however, European colonists became accustomed to and even took up the habit of smoking tobacco. Like the Native Americans, Europeans ascribed medicinal properties to tobacco, claiming that it could cure headaches and skin irritations. Even so, Europeans did not import tobacco in great quantities until the 1590s. At that time, it became the first truly global commodity; English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese colonists grew it for the world market.

Native people also introduced Europeans to chocolate, made from cacao seeds and used by the Aztecs in

Mesoamerica as currency. Mesoamerican people consumed unsweetened chocolate in a drink with chili peppers, vanilla, and a spice called achiote. This chocolate drink—xocolatl—was part of ritual ceremonies, such as marriage, and an everyday item for those who could afford it.



DID YOU KNOW

Chocolate contains theobromine, a stimulant, which may be why Native people believed it brought them closer to the sacred world.

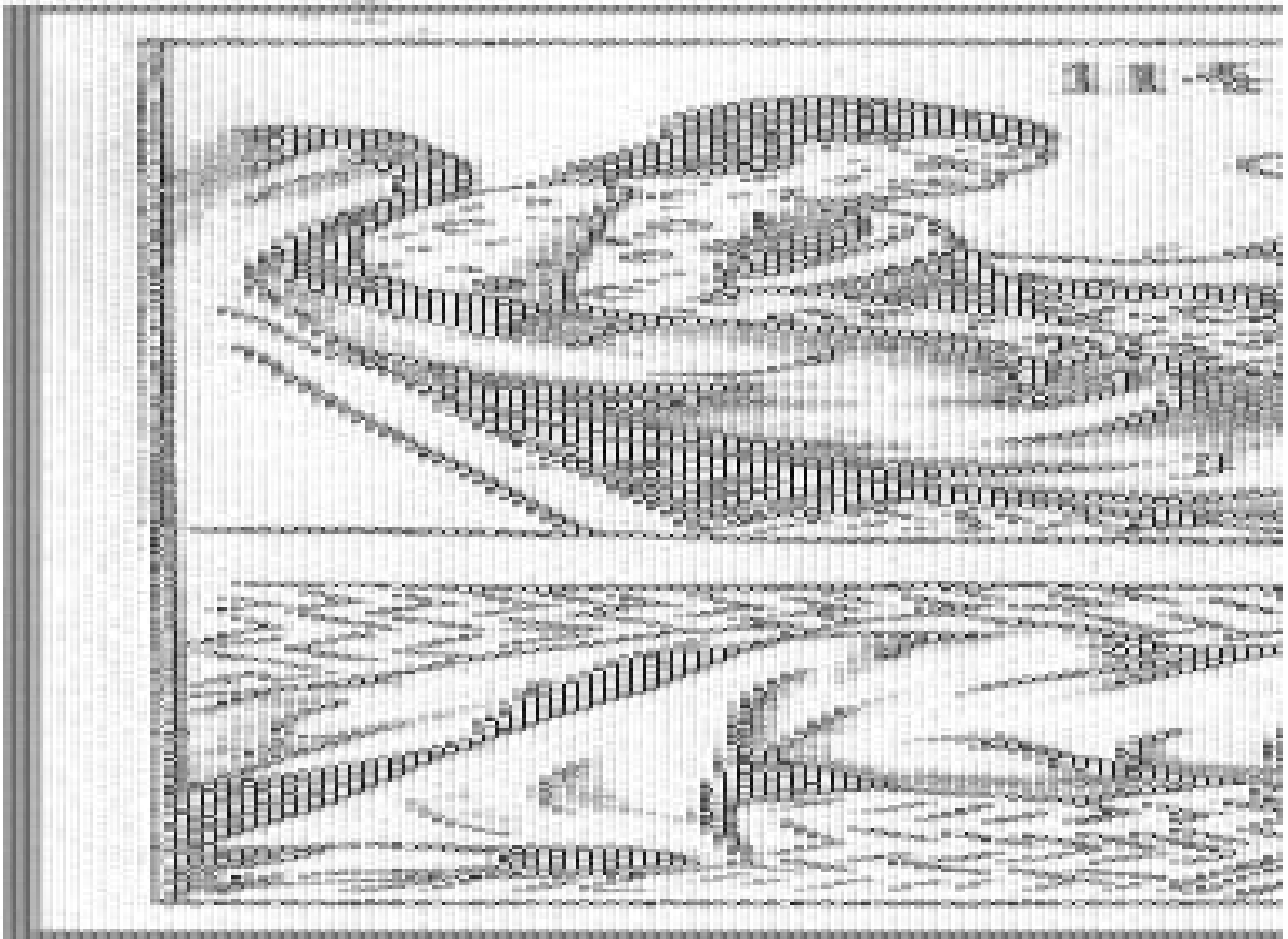
Spaniards in the New World considered drinking chocolate a vile practice; one called chocolate “the Devil’s vomit.” In time, however, they introduced the beverage to Spain. At first, chocolate was available only in the Spanish court, where the elite mixed it with sugar and other spices. Later, as its availability spread, chocolate gained a reputation as a love potion.

The crossing of the Atlantic by plants such as cacao and tobacco illustrates the ways in which the discovery of the New World changed the habits and behaviors of Europeans. Plants once considered sacred or vital to native societies became valuable commodities in Atlantic trade. The consumption of these commodities in Europe contributed to the creation of new customs, such as smoking tobacco or drinking chocolate.

Europeans also changed the New World by bringing Old World animals to the Americas. On his second voyage, Christopher Columbus brought pigs, horses, cows, and chickens to the islands of the Caribbean. Later explorers followed suit by introducing similar animals or reintroducing ones that had previously been extinct in the Americas, such as horses. With less vulnerability to disease, these animals often fared better than humans in their new home, thriving both in the wild and in domestication.

Native cultures were unfamiliar with European livestock, and they sometimes competed with domestic animals for resources. In some cases, Native Americans were forced to defend their crops from wandering, hungry livestock. In others, native societies incorporated European livestock with great success, with the most notable examples being Plains tribes and horses, or the Navajos and sheep.

Travelers between the Americas, Africa, and Europe included microbes: silent, invisible life forms that had profound and devastating consequences. Native people had no immunity against diseases from across the Atlantic; they had never been exposed to them. European explorers unwittingly brought with them chickenpox, measles, mumps, smallpox, and many other diseases, all of which ravaged Native peoples despite their attempts to treat them. Native people had no experience with European bacteria and viruses, although there is evidence that they had experience with certain diseases, such as the common cold and syphilis. The outbreak of smallpox and other diseases in North America decimated the population and wholly destroyed some Native cultures.



This 16th-century Aztec drawing shows the suffering of a typical victim of smallpox. Smallpox and other contagious diseases brought by European explorers decimated Native American populations in the Americas.



THINK ABOUT IT

On the whole, what was the impact of the Columbian Exchange on the New World? What was the impact of the Columbian Exchange on Europeans?



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we discussed how European rulers and investors hoped to enrich their nations and themselves and to gain the greatest share of what was believed to be a limited amount of wealth. New trade routes led to the emergence of more extensive globalization.

Native Americans who came into contact with Europeans found their worlds turned upside down as the new arrivals introduced their religions and ideas about property and goods. Europeans gained new foods, customs, plants, and animals in the Columbian Exchange, turning them into commodities to be bought and sold. Native Americans adapted to the introduction of certain plants and animals, while the introduction of diseases, such as smallpox, nearly destroyed them. The Columbian Exchange, like globalization in general, revealed that colonization could be both a beneficial and a disruptive process.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Map of European Colonization of the New World](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Colonization

The governing control one nation has over another people’s economy, labor, geography, politics, and so on.

Columbian Exchange

The movement of plants, animals, and diseases across the Atlantic due to European exploration of the Americas.

Commodification

The transformation of something—for example, an item of ritual significance—into a commodity with monetary value.

Globalization

The ever-increasing interconnectedness of the world.



DATES TO KNOW

1095–1291

The Crusades lead to cultural exchanges between Europe and civilizations to the east.

1493

Christopher Columbus introduces sugar to Hispaniola.

1590

Europeans begin importing tobacco grown in the Americas in large quantities.