

Worlds Transformed

Conquest and Colonization

Spain, whose monarchs financed Columbus's voyage, proceeded to take the lead among European nations seeking to capitalize on their "discoveries." Spanish explorers traversed much of the Americas, including areas that eventually became part of the south and southwestern United States.

Video: Conquest of the Americas

The Spanish conquest of vast regions of the Americas and the Indian peoples living there had far-reaching effects. Columbus's voyage, for example, touched off European explorations that prompted a redrawing of world maps. The conquest also raised the question of what happens when two civilizations that never knew the other existed meet, as seen in the clash between the Spanish and Aztecs in Mexico.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- What were the motivations behind Spanish conquests in the Americas?
- How did the Spaniards justify conquering the Indians? Were alternatives to brutal conquest possible?
- Why was Cortés's entry into Tenochtitlán a unique moment in history?
- How and why was Cortés able to conquer Mexico?
- What areas of America did de Soto, Coronado, and Cabrillo explore? What were the effects of their explorations?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: Columbus' voyage permanently linked the four continents of Europe, Africa, South America and North America for the first time. But Columbus would go to his grave believing that what he had found was not a new continent, but simply the outlying islands of the Far East.

In 1492, mapmakers still depicted the world much as Ptolemy had some fourteen centuries earlier. North and South America were not represented at all on maps of this period.

But Columbus' voyage set off a frenzy of exploration that led in rapid succession to the European discoveries of South America, Central America, Florida, the southern and eastern coastlines of North America, and Mexico.

In 1507, a German cartographer named Martin Waldseemuller first showed the new lands as a fourth continent, completely separate from Europe, Asia and Africa. Waldseemuller had no proof of this; he based his map on scientific theories about the size and shape of the globe.

In 1513, twenty years after Columbus sailed into the Caribbean, Vasco Nuñez De Balboa crossed the isthmus of Panama and found the Pacific Ocean on the other side.

Europeans finally had proof that what they had discovered was more than just a western route to Asia--it was a world unto itself.

Music introduction

Actor, Christopher Columbus: "My desire was to pass by no single island without taking possession of it."

Narrator: In 1493, the pope divided the New World, giving everything east of the demarcation line to Portugal, and everything west of that line to Spain.

Stuart Schwartz: The old expression is that the Spanish were motivated by "glory, God, and gold", and in some ways that's accurate. God – because the expansion, and the Spanish crown justified the expansion by the concessions given to it to carry the word of the church to heathen lands. Gold – because they saw no contradiction in gaining wealth for Spain, for the king. And glory – because these are people of the renaissance who have a concept of themselves and what they're doing. That they, through their own efforts, are able to make their name, make their reputation, serve their king and serve God all at the same time.

David Weber, Southern Methodist University: The explorers, or conquistadors, were told to read to the Indians a document that explained that they represented the king, and the king represented the pope. And the king and the pope had told the Indians essentially to submit or if they resisted, they would be smashed. So I think this is more than simply a justification. It's a

deep sense of righteousness that the Spaniards brought with them.

Narrator: In search of new lands to conquer, Hernán Cortés led an expedition that landed on the eastern shores of Mexico in 1519.

Following rumors of a rich civilization, Cortés headed inland toward Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire.

Stuart Schwartz: The people who lived in Central Mexico are the people that we have come to call Aztecs. They would have called themselves “Mexica”.

Central Mexico had been an area of developed civilization for thousands of years before the Mexica came on the scene. Great civilizations had risen and fallen.

So the “Aztec Empire” as it came to be called really dates in the last 50 or 70 years prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

Tenochtitlan, which is where the present core of Mexico City is located, was really a wondrous place. The city held perhaps somewhere between 150,000 and 300,000 people; which would have made it on a scale as large as any of the great European cities. It was in fact a great city. It had a great marketplace. It was a political center, and it was also a center for industry.

Narrator: Word of Cortés' approach quickly reached Montezuma, the ruler of the Aztecs. When the Spaniards marched into Tenochtitlan, it was a unique moment in world history.

Stuart Schwartz: Here were two incredible civilizations that had developed independent of each other, had no knowledge of each other, and then are brought into contact. Each side had to draw on itself to explain the other side. “where did these people come from? How could we explain them? How did they fit into our vision of the world?”

Narrator: Relations between the Aztecs and the Spaniards were peaceful at first, but the Spaniards soon angered the Indians.

After barely escaping Tenochtitlan alive, Cortés and his followers returned the following year with an army of Indians from neighboring areas.

Stuart Schwartz: The Aztecs, partly for religious reasons and partly because of the resistance of their opponents, left a few areas unconquered in the area under their general control. What happened when the Europeans arrived is that these unconquered areas provided natural allies

to the Europeans against the Mexica.

The military conquest was complete. The Spanish in the last days of the fighting for the capital Tenochtitlan essentially went building by building and the city was destroyed.

Actor, Aztec Nobleman: Those whose assignment it was to do the killing just went on foot, each with his metal sword and his leather shield. Then they surrounded those who were dancing, going among the cylindrical drums. They struck a drummer's arms; both of his hands were severed. They struck his neck; his head landed far away.

David Weber: Cortés and the conquistadors were successful, historians think, because of technology, European technology – guns, powder – because they brought large animals with them that frightened Indians and vicious dogs that were not present in the hemisphere before. Also, famously, because of disease; particularly smallpox that wiped out the Aztec empire. I think we have to think about the extraordinary surprise that was involved here; in that, the conquistadors played by different rules. In the case of the Aztecs who performed almost ceremonial wars in which they took captives alive in order to sacrifice them, they weren't used to an adversary who arrived with the intention of killing one, and of achieving total victory.

Narrator: After his conquest of the Aztecs, Cortés sent several shiploads of stolen treasure back to Spain, including gold, silver, emeralds, pearls, rare gems, exotic plants and animals, and Indian slaves.

This magnificent plunder whetted the appetites of other conquistadors, and they soon followed Cortes' lead.

In South America, Pizarro's conquest and looting of the Incan empire returned unheard of quantities of gold and silver to Spain.

But the conquistadors of North America would search in vain for such fabulous riches.

David Weber: Hernando De Soto was one of the most experienced of conquistadors. He'd already been successful in Peru with the Pizarros. And yet, like so many conquistadors, there was never a point where he seemed to reach complete saturation. There was another conquest to be made, he thought, in North America.

Narrator: De Soto and Coronado between them crossed much of the North American continent. Their insatiable greed and their unflinching cruelty toward the Native Americans are legendary.

But another would-be conquistador had quite a different encounter with Indian peoples. Cabeza De Vaca and a number of other Spaniards were taken captive when their expedition shipwrecked along the coast of Texas. They eventually escaped and wandered for years across the region, trying to find their way back to Mexico.

Actor, Cabeza De Vaca: "We traveled in that region through so many different villages of such diverse tongues that my memory gets confused."

David Weber: Cabeza De Vaca finally runs into a group of Pima Indians in Northwest Mexico in what is today Sonora. And the Pimas say to him in effect, "how can you be one of those Spaniards that you're trying to rejoin? They kill people. You've cured people. They rob people. You've generously given to us. You're naked. They come with armor and swords." Cabeza de Vaca very much had entered an Indian world and had come to appreciate it and I think it's the rarity of that experience that he had that so fascinates us yet today.

Narrator: Cabeza De Vaca was more or less alone in his respect for the Indians.

As more and more Spanish settlers came to colonize the new world, they found the Indians themselves to be its most valuable resource. With their labor the riches of New Spain were extracted and cultivated.

But even the Indians turned out to be a limited resource, as disease, hunger and exhaustion quickly depopulated a world once inhabited by perhaps as many as a hundred million native Americans.

End of video.

The Compassionate Conquistador

The story of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's experience in America differs from most Spanish conquistadors. Cabeza de Vaca, known as "The Compassionate Conquistador," traveled throughout the southwestern area of what is now the United States nearly 500 years ago. Trading was one activity that helped Cabeza de Vaca and his followers survive in a foreign culture. What does the following excerpt from Cabeza de Vaca's journal tell you about his experience in America?

"So, trading along with my wares I penetrated inland as far as I cared to go and along the coast as much as forty or fifty leagues....This trade suited me well because it gave me liberty to go wherever I pleased; I was not bound to do anything and (was) no longer a slave. Wherever I went they treated me well, and gave me (food) to eat for the sake of my wares."

Video: New Spain

New Spain analyzes the economic, political, and social effects of Spanish colonization in the New World and also examines the influence of Spanish missionaries.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- What were the economic, political, and social characteristics of Spain's empire in the New World in the sixteenth century?
- What roles did religious missionaries play in New Spain?
- Why did the Spanish found a settlement at St. Augustine?
- Why did the Spanish settle in the area that became New Mexico? What led to the Acoma rebellion and how was it suppressed?
- Why was Santa Fe founded in 1608?

Video script:

Music introduction

Actor, Spanish Priest in Florida: "Gunpowder frightens the most valiant and courageous Indian and renders him slave to the white man's command."

Narrator: Despite the fact that they were greatly outnumbered by the Native Americans, Spanish colonists quickly subdued and settled many areas of the new world.

By the late 1500s, almost a quarter of a million Spaniards had come to settle in the colonies of New Spain. The hardships of living in the new world were great, but the rewards could be spectacular.

Although precious metals and gems were the most alluring products of the colonies, agriculture and ranching provided more stable profits. Animal hides and sugar grown for export to Spain generated a flourishing colonial economy fueled by Indian slave labor.

And when the Indian labor gave out, the Spaniards began to import slave labor from Africa, adding yet another lucrative industry in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

While the Spanish colonists were busy extracting the material wealth of the New World and exporting it back to Europe, Spain was exporting a product of its own—Catholicism.

David Weber: Spain's missionaries in the southwest and the southeast from Florida all the way to California were Franciscans. They belonged to a religious order that had as its own mission to convert Indians to Catholicism; which also meant, in effect, erasing Indians' previous religions. But I think along with that, historians have been very aware that missionaries served a purpose for the Spanish crown. And the Spanish crown was aware of this purpose too in supporting missionaries, namely that Indians would be converted into Spaniards in the process of being converted into Christians. They would learn to dress like Spaniards, farm like Spaniards, ranch like Spaniards.

Stuart Schwartz: It was one thing for the Spanish to destroy the great temples to the Indian gods and to remove the priest class that had existed amongst the Indians, but quite another thing to remove the religious beliefs from the minds and hearts of people. And although Catholicism was introduced, missionaries came and the peoples of Mexico were converted. Many of the old ways and old beliefs, the ways of thinking about things and of seeing things continued on in a new form as part of an adaptive culture in which the ancient ways were adapted to the new religion and to the new demands of Spanish culture.

Narrator: When other European countries saw the wealth that Spain was importing from its colonies, they too began to look for opportunities in the Americas.

To protect its territory from pirates and privateers, Spain established the colony of St. Augustine on the east coast of Florida. Meanwhile, the territory that lay to the north of Mexico and the Caribbean remained largely a mystery.

In spite of the failures of De Soto and Coronado to discover hidden riches, many still believed that they were there.

And the beguiling myth of the Northwest Passage, a waterway which allegedly connected the Atlantic to the Pacific, continued to exert its power over the Spanish imagination.

It was with these two chimeras in mind that a wealthy silver magnate from Zacatecas named

Juan De Oñate set out to colonize New Mexico in 1595.

Deena Gonzalez, Pomona College: I think one reason the Spanish arrived or moved toward what is now Northern New Mexico is that they were very smart people. They went where the food and the supplies were, and the pueblo people had lived for several centuries in that area. Their villages and permanent towns and communities dotted the Rio Grande Valleys. They were close to the water. They were close to the forest. They were close to river routes that allowed the movement of goods and of supplies. So I think that the pueblo people who were divided into, you know, over twenty independent villages had developed a lifestyle that the Spanish found useful to them.

Narrator: But less than a year after Oñate and his band of colonizers arrived, the pueblo Indians had begun to find their presence intolerable.

David Weber: The Acomans were annoyed, to put it mildly, that Spanish were taking their food, and so killed eleven Spanish soldiers. One of the most controversial episodes in Oñate's tenure as governor of New Mexico was his decision to punish the Acomans who had rebelled. The punishment that they meted out after defeating the Acomans was exceedingly harsh. Oñate ordered the foot to be cut off, or one of the feet to be cut off, of every adult male over age 25 and that has lingered on in the history of New Mexico to the present day.

Narrator: After ten years of eking out a difficult existence among the Indians, Oñate and his settlers were no richer and no closer to finding the Northwest passage. In fact, many of the settlers had deserted, preferring to return to Mexico rather than face the hardships of life on the Spanish frontier.

In 1608, some of the remaining settlers moved about 20 miles south of their settlement at San Gabriel to a new home they would soon name Santa Fe.

Fran Levine, Santa Fe Community College: Santa Fe was founded in this particular location because there wasn't a resident pueblo population. It was removed from the agricultural lands of the pueblo peoples and it allowed the Spanish to separate from the pueblo communities and establish their own separate entity and empire here in Santa Fe.

Narrator: The Spaniards may have founded a separate town, but they remained dependent on the Indians for many things. And they were in constant contact with them.

As in other parts of the new world, the gradual mixing of races and the blending of cultures

would eventually create a new hybrid culture, a place where Indian and European traditions met and overlapped.

End of video.

Check Your Understanding

Focuses on the Spanish conquistadors' exploration and conquest of the Americas. By the early 1500s, both Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Mexico had developed highly advanced civilizations. Cortés' entry into Tenochtitlan was a unique moment in world history because these two incredible civilizations, previously unknown to the other, made contact. While Cortes conquered, Cabeza de Vaca concentrated on trade and became known as "the compassionate conquistador."