

**Dr. Chouana and Mrs. Kahoul**  
**L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021**  
**Course: Colonial History of America**

### 3. Early America and Christophe Columbus

#### Objectives

After this lecture, students should:

- ✓ be familiar with the history of early America and its colonization
- ✓ be able to give a short summary of the colonization of the Americas by Europeans
- ✓ have clues about the explorations and achievements of Christophe Columbus

#### Introduction

In this lecture, we will examine the colonization of the Americas. A particular focus will be placed on Christophe Columbus as he is the key figure of the colonial history of America. In short, we will have a general overview of the colonization of the Americas starting with Christophe Columbus.

#### 1. General overview

The European colonization of the Americas was the conquest of Western European nations in North and South America. Europe was having internal wars and was slowly recovering from the loss of population caused by the Black Death. European colonization impacted the political systems, geographic boundaries, and languages that predominate in the hemisphere's largely independent states today.

The first Europeans to reach North America were Icelandic Vikings in about the year 1000.

The other European possessions included Spanish Florida, Spanish New Mexico, Spanish Mesoamerica, Spanish Caribbean, the English colonies of Virginia and New England, the French colonies of Acadia, Canada, And Haiti, the Swedish colony of New Sweden, the Dutch New Netherland, and the Russian



Alaska. As more nations gained an interest in the colonization of the Americas, deadly confrontations emerged with the indigenous peoples who bravely fought to keep their land. These confrontations with natives were the leading dynamic in North America. It means that European nations wanted to extent their territories in the Americas and this created frictions between them.

## 2. The three G's

European explorers followed the three G's principle: Glory, Gold, and Glory. These three motivations fostered the Age of Exploration in the Americas.

- **Glory** was a relatively new idea in Europe. In fact, it came out of the Renaissance ideal of Humanism and the focus on individual achievement. European kings and queens wanted glory for their kingdom. The invention of the printing press popularized explorations as it became more possible for explorers like Christophe Columbus, Hernán Cortés, and Amerigo Vespucci, to name but a few, to gain fame for their actions. Therefore, the discovery of new lands in the American continent became a significant motivator for explorers to seek glory for themselves and their nations.
- **Gold** is what truly drove Europeans to explore the Americas. Government rulers would send explorers to find riches like land, spices, gold and other resources that would make their country rich and important. An example of that would be how Christopher Columbus explored for gold and wealth to bring back to Spain. He traded with the indigenous people for gold at a great profit for Spain.
- **God** and religion were also a popular motive for exploration. With Europe Christianized, people wanted to spread the Gospel to the rest of the world, because Europeans had always seen spreading Christianity as a good thing. Colonization would later become a race to convert indigenous people to a particular brand of Christianity. Religion was also an excuse for enslaving or exploiting non-Christians which allowed kingdoms to participate in the slave trade.

## 3. Of Christophe Columbus

During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, leaders of several European nations sponsored expeditions abroad in the hope that explorers would find great wealth and vast undiscovered lands. The Portuguese were the earliest participants in this Age of Exploration. Starting in about 1420, small Portuguese ships zipped along the African coast, carrying spices, gold, slaves and other goods from Asia and Africa to Europe.

Other European nations, particularly Spain, were eager to share in the seemingly limitless riches of the Far East. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Spain's Reconquista - the expulsion of Jews and Muslims out of the kingdom after centuries of war - was complete, and the nation turned its attention to exploration and conquest in other areas of the world.

In 1492, the Italian navigator Christopher Columbus was sent by the Spanish crown and sailed west from Europe and landed on the Bahama Islands. Columbus never saw the mainland United States, but the first explorations of the continental United States were launched from the Spanish possessions that he helped establish.

Columbus made four trips across the Atlantic Ocean from Spain in 1492, 1493, 1498 and 1502. He was determined to find a direct water route west from Europe to Asia, but he never did. Instead, he stumbled upon the Americas. Despite the fact he did not really discover the New World; his journeys marked the beginning of centuries of exploration and colonization of North and South America.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was nearly impossible to reach Asia from Europe by land. The route was long and arduous, and encounters with hostile armies were difficult to avoid. Portuguese explorers solved this problem by taking to the sea: They sailed south along the West African coast and around the Cape of Good Hope.

But Columbus had a different idea: Why not sail west across the Atlantic instead of around the massive African continent? The young navigator's logic was sound, but his math was faulty. He argued incorrectly that the circumference of the Earth was much smaller than his contemporaries believed it was; accordingly, he believed that the journey by boat from Europe to Asia should be not only possible, but comparatively easy via a northwest passage.

Columbus presented his plan to officials in Portugal and England, but it was not until 1492 that he found a sympathetic audience: the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. On August 3, 1492, Columbus and his crew set sail from Spain in three ships: the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria. On October 12, the ships made landfall—not in the East Indies, as Columbus assumed, but on one of the Bahamian islands, likely San Salvador.

For months, Columbus sailed from island to island in what we now know as the Caribbean, looking for the pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and other objects that he had promised to his Spanish patrons, but he did not find much. In January 1493, leaving several dozen men behind in a makeshift settlement on Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic), he left for Spain.

In September 1493, Columbus returned to the Americas. He found Hispaniola destroyed and left his brothers Bartolomeo and Diego Columbus behind to rebuild, along with part of his ships' crew and hundreds of enslaved indigenous people.

In May 1498, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic for the third time. He visited Trinidad and the South American mainland before returning to the ill-fated Hispaniola settlement, where the colonists had staged a bloody revolt against the Columbus brothers' mismanagement and brutality. Conditions were so bad that Spanish authorities had to send a new governor to take over. Columbus was arrested and returned to Spain in chains. In 1502, cleared of the most serious charges but stripped of his noble titles, the aging Columbus persuaded the Spanish crown to pay for one last trip across the Atlantic. This time, Columbus made it all the way to Panama—just miles from the Pacific Ocean—where he had to abandon two of his four ships after damage from storms and hostile natives. Empty-handed, the explorer returned to Spain, where he died in 1506.

Today, Columbus has a controversial legacy. He is remembered as a daring and path-breaking explorer who transformed the New World. The Columbian Exchange transferred people, animals, food and disease across cultures. Old World wheat became an American food staple. African coffee and Asian sugar cane became cash crops for Latin America, while American foods like corn, tomatoes and potatoes were introduced into European diets. However, Columbus' actions also unleashed changes that would eventually devastate the natives in the American continent.

## **Conclusion**

- ✓ Class discussion
- ✓ Read the short passage of NPR Radio about Hernán Cortés and the conquest of Mexico (Extra reading- Lecture 3). What do you make of the Spanish conquest of Mexico? Can we compare the conquest of Mexico to the French colonization of Algeria? Do you think France should apologize for atrocities against Algerians? If yes, why?