

## HEROES OR VILLAINS: SPANISH CONQUISTADORS IN THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Portugal had decided that finding an all-water route to the Indies would be the most profitable way to dominate the lucrative spice trade. The Portuguese believed that the shortest route was to go round the African continent and sail east. After several failed attempts, the Portuguese sailor, **Bartholomew Dias**, finally rounded the southern tip of Africa, which he named the Cape of Good Hope.

Lacking enough supplies to carry on sailing, Dias returned to Portugal in 1488 with the good news that the Indian Ocean could be reached by sea. However, it would be another decade before his countryman, **Vasco de Gama**, would actually make it all the way to India in 1498.

In the meantime, the Spanish king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella, became alarmed at the prospect of Portugal dominating the spice trade. They, too, wanted to find an all-water route to Asia. Consequently, they were persuaded by an experienced captain of Italian birth, **Christopher Columbus**, to provide ships and supplies for an attempt to reach the Indies, not by sailing around Africa, but by sailing west

across the uncharted Atlantic Ocean.

Columbus had a good plan, but he calculated the circumference of the Earth as being much smaller than it actually was. So, from 1492 until 1502, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic four times, each time exploring new parts of two continents about which the European world knew very little. But Columbus did not know where he was. In 1506, Christopher Columbus died believing that he had reached the Indies.

All school children today are taught the significance of the date 1492. Perhaps, however, it was Columbus's second voyage, in 1493, that was the most important of all. That trip across the Atlantic consisted of 17 ships loaded with 1,200 passengers and enough supplies to settle permanently in the "new" world. From then on, the Spanish captains were no longer referred to simply as explorers, but as conquerors, or *conquistadores* in Spanish.

Among those twelve hundred passengers on Columbus's second voyage was **Juan Ponce de Leon**. Only 19 years old at the time of the crossing, Ponce de Leon quickly established himself in the new world as a great administrator. He was the first to explore the island of Puerto Rico where he established a settlement and became the first governor. In 1513, he led a group of sailors and settlers to explore territory north of the island of Puerto Rico. The land he discovered he named "Florida." As a result, Ponce de Leon is often credited with establishing the first settlement in North America, which is believed to have been near present-day St. Augustine.

After the first two voyages of Columbus, the Spanish monarchy began financing many more voyages to the new world. On one of those voyages was another Italian in the service of the Spanish crown named **Amerigo Vespucci**. Vespucci was not the

captain of the ship he traveled to the new world on in 1499, but he was a very observant assistant. It was Vespucci who first realized that the Spanish explorers were not in the Indies but were in a completely "new world." And, unlike Columbus, when Vespucci returned to Europe, he wrote extensively about his travels. Consequently, this "new world" came to be called "America" and not "Columbia."

Hearing stories about fountains of youth and cities of gold, more and more Spanish captains set out from their posts in the Caribbean to discover and conquer even more territory in the new world. One of the most ruthless of these conquistadores was **Hernán Cortés**. In 1519, Cortés crossed the Yucatan peninsula and subdued the most powerful civilization in North America, the Aztecs. By most accounts at the time, the Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, was more magnificent and more modern than any city in early 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. On the ruins of Tenochtitlan, Cortés laid the foundation for what is today, Mexico City.

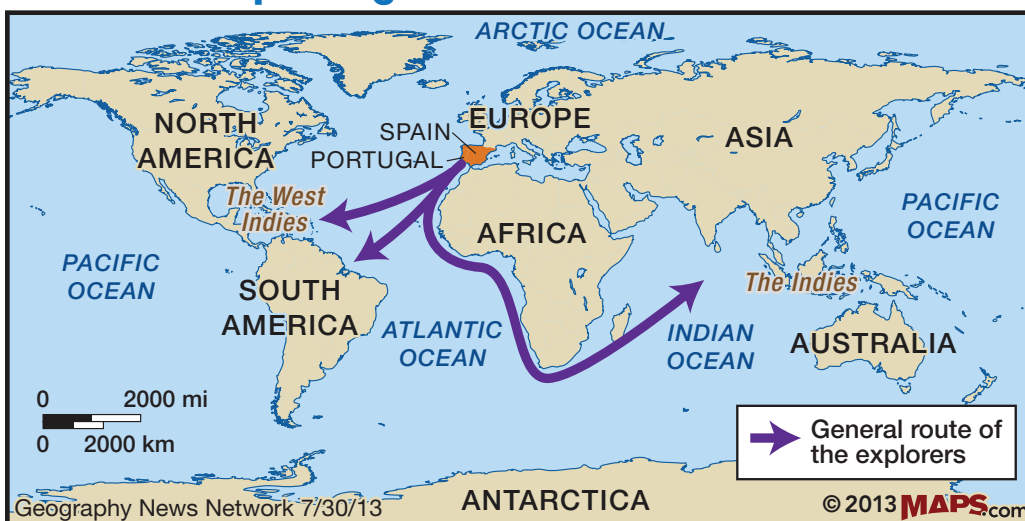
As one of the top officers under Cortés's command, **Pedro Alvarado** was sent to explore the land south of the Valley of Mexico. In 1521, with the help of some Native American tribes, he was able to conquer most of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Consequently, he is often referred to as the conqueror of Central America.

A few years earlier, the governor of Panama, **Vasco Balboa**, had led an expedition across the Isthmus of Panama to find the South Sea. Balboa was told by the natives he subdued that there were whole cities of gold across the sea which lay to the south of Panama. In search of a route to this treasure, Balboa crossed the Isthmus in 1513 and became the first European to view the vast South Sea. (Magellan would later name it the Pacific Ocean.)

Unfortunately for Balboa, he would never see the gold from beyond the south sea because he was betrayed by one of his top advisors, **Francisco Pizarro**. Following a dispute with another royal governor of Panama, Balboa was captured by Pizarro and returned to the capital to stand trial. He was found guilty of plotting to overthrow the governor and was beheaded. Pizarro went on to become perhaps the most famous Conquistador of all. He eventually left Panama and sailed across the South Sea to the coasts of Ecuador and Peru, where, in 1533, after nearly a decade of trying, he conquered the powerful Incan empire.

**Hernando de Soto** was one of Pizarro's top captains. After the conquest of Peru, de Soto returned to Spain where he could

### Exploring Uncharted Territories



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have lived the rest of his life with wealth and fame. However, he could not resist the pull to look for rumored cities of gold (El Dorado) in North America, so he returned to the New World in 1539 to lead an expedition to the interior of North America. Starting on the gulf coast of Florida, de Soto and his men traveled deep into the interior of North America. In all, they explored the area that today includes almost all of the states of the southeastern United States. Unfortunately, de Soto did not live to finish his expedition. He died in 1543 along the banks of the Mississippi river. His men carried on without him, but they never found El Dorado.

During the time that the conquistadores were subduing the natives in the New World, the Portuguese sailor, **Ferdinand Magellan**, was contracted by the Spanish monarchy to circumnavigate the Earth by ship. Magellan had already sailed many times from Portugal to the Indies around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. Now he wanted to find a passage to the Indies by sailing westward around the southern tip of South America. As in the case of Columbus's voyages earlier, only the Spanish were interested in financing Magellan's adventure.

In September of 1519, Magellan and his five ships sailed westward from Seville, Spain. But by 1522, after nearly three years of searching for a way circumnavigate the Earth by water, only one of Magellan's original five ships made it back to Spain. And Magellan was not on board. Just a few months earlier, he had been killed after a dispute with some natives on an island in the Philippines. Still, we credit Magellan with being the first explorer to definitively prove that the earth was indeed a sphere.

These men are the most famous of the Spanish Explorers. By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, there were hundreds of expeditions and thousands of European settlers colonizing vast areas of North and South America. Sadly, in every instance, the native people were the losers. They were not equipped to resist European technology, barbarism, or diseases. Within only a few years of Pizarro's arrival in Peru, for example, as much as 90% of the Incan people had been enslaved or killed either by the Spanish or by the Small Pox virus they brought with them to the New World.

Finally, no chronicle of the Conquistadors would be complete without mentioning the work of **Bartholomew de las Casas**. De las Casas was a Catholic bishop who traveled

extensively in the Caribbean and Central America during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. He was known unofficially as the "Protector of the Indians" in the New World. In his book, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, he detailed the atrocities perpetrated against the natives of the new world.

In 1552, De las Casas wrote, "We can estimate very surely and truthfully that in the forty years that have passed, with the infernal actions of the [conquerors], there have been unjustly slain more than twelve million men, women, and children. In truth, I believe without trying to deceive myself that the number of the slain is more like fifteen million. . . . Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that [they] have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. . . . It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies."

And that is the Geography News Network. August 5, 2013. #14.

## QUESTIONS

1. This story begins with Portuguese sailors looking for an all water route to the spice trade in the East Indies and ends with the Spanish Conquistadors decimating the native people of the Americas. In your mind, is this a story of heroes or villains? When looking back in time to an era very different from our own, is it fair for us to make judgments about past actions or events using the standards of our contemporary lives? How do you suppose these "conquerors" justified the terrible things they did to the native people? List some other well-known events in the past where one group of people thought it was right or reasonable to mistreat or kill a different group of people.
2. What do you think motivated the leaders of European countries to provide ships and supplies for new world exploration and colonization? What motivated the captains, sailors, and settlers to undertake these dangerous voyages across the Atlantic to settle in an unknown world? Are there any similar, dangerous adventures in the modern world that people are willing to risk their lives on? What would motivate you today to take a risk that had a high probability of personal injury or death?
3. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the efforts of these explorers were considered heroic. Today our negative opinion of them is influenced by the moral standards of our time. What makes a person a hero today? What are some instances in the modern world where people have done something everyone agrees is heroic? Who are your heroes and what makes them a hero in your eyes?

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