



CHAPTER 13 | THE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE AND THE AGE OF EXPLORATION

INTRODUCTION

This is our second chapter studying the fabulous adventures of brave explorers and the third week on the Renaissance. There were so many exciting voyages during this period—let’s see if we can understand how important each discovery was in God’s ongoing plan.

That should come as no surprise to us. If we learned one thing from studying four to five thousand years of human history and cultures last year it was this: sin is always there in every branch of the human race. The Age of Exploration and the Renaissance were both shot through with sin—conquistadores greedily searched for in the New World, while Renaissance men proudly strove for glory back in Europe.

LATE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE

The heart of the Roman humanist movement involved a delight in rediscovering classical Greco-Roman cultures, as well as in studying and imitating their art forms and social structures. However, and most importantly, these humanists emphasized Greco-Roman wisdom and values—particularly, a love of the forms of nature, the bodies of men and women, and the vast potential of human achievement. These, set almost apart from the grace of God, were the driving forces of the Southern Renaissance.

St. Peter’s Basilica

Julius II became Pope in 1503, and he was called the “Warrior Pope” because he personally led his troops in conquering Perugia and Bologna, cities that had once been part of the Papal States. As you may recall from earlier chapters, church leaders had acted as temporal lords with troops at their command since at least the late 11th century A.D. Although generally prohibited from warlike pursuits, some Church leaders did go to war or led in battles as knights. In fact, sometimes they fought against Christian kings or nobles who encroached on their lands or authorities just as they would against foreign invaders!

When Jesus rebuked his disciple who injured the High Priest’s servant with a sword, cutting off his ear, He said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting.” The idea of Popes leading men into battle for wars of conquest to aggrandize their own territorial holdings shows once more how mixing church and state (being ruler of the Papal States) was a dangerous idea.

For a little over four centuries, popes had been increasing their earthly power and wealth. Perhaps it no longer seemed strange to some Europeans that he should do so. Nevertheless, many felt that the Pope, as the head of the church and its highest official, was supposed to be following Jesus’ example by washing the disciples’ feet, being the servant of all, and forgiving his enemies, not pitching wars to bring them under his rule by force!

Julius II, whose name indeed seems more fitting for a Roman conquerer than a humble servant of Christ, wanted more than just to regain control of the Papal States, though—he wanted to rebuild Rome, restoring it to its ancient glory. One of the buildings that most needed work was Saint Peter’s Basilica, built



above the spot where Peter was crucified upside down. It was the building where Charlemagne had been crowned in 800 A.D., but it was falling to pieces by the late 15th century. Julius set a team to work to make it the most magnificent cathedral in the world.

For this project, Julius II gathered together the greatest artists and architects of all Italy. He commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of his personal chapel—the famous Sistine Chapel—in the Vatican. Raphael painted the Pope's personal rooms and supervised the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica. Workmen used marble from the ruins of the Coliseum to build the new structure. Their ancestors had stripped those very stones from the Temple in Jerusalem in 72 A.D., when the last Jewish revolt was crushed by Rome.

Julius II wanted to restore Rome to its former glory, but his expensive projects were designed to impress humans, not God. This is what we mean by “Romans 1 humanism.” This kind of humanism starts by putting man at the center and moving God backstage, but it doesn't stay that way. Once God is displaced from His proper position at the center of all things, humans have a way of forgetting Him quickly and entirely.

Pope Julius II was accused of all kinds of wickedness during his lifetime, and worse after he died. The Dutch humanist Erasmus, for example, was probably the author of a story entitled, *Julius Excluded from Heaven*. It begins with the drunken Pope trying to open the gate of heaven with the key to his secret money-chest. All the soldiers who died in his wars are behind him, and Erasmus calls them “a horrifying mob of ruffians, reeking of nothing but brothels, booze shops and gunpowder.”¹

When St. Peter refuses to let him in, Pope Julius threatens him with his army and then with excommunication. When Peter confronts him with his sin, Julius insists that the Pope has authority to excuse any sin. Peter turns him away, but that doesn't stop Julius. The story ends with him mustering his army to launch an attack on Heaven. Erasmus wraps up his attack on Julius II with the sweeping condemnation of his papacy as “the worst tyranny in the world, the enemy of Christ, the church's bane.”²

Michelangelo

Leonardo may have painted the most famous picture in the world, but his younger neighbor Michelangelo Buonarroti rivals him for the title of the ultimate Renaissance man. Born two years after da Vinci pioneered landscape painting, Michelangelo shared several similarities with the older man. Both were artists as well as poets and engineers. Both men worked in Florence, and for Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Leonardo's strengths were his subdued, unified, and blended colors that melded gracefully into one another. Michelangelo's innovative style displayed much brighter, contrasting colors, as well as intensity of movement and highly muscular figures. Leonardo's major expression of art was painting. While Michelangelo, when forced, proved to be an amazing painter, he always loved sculpture, and thought of himself as a sculptor.

Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures were highly realistic, especially anatomically. He painted and sculpted realistic-looking muscles, veins, and flesh on his figures. His painted figures appear almost contorted, so much are they straining with motion and effort. Michelangelo's best-known works are his “Pietà,” his “David,” and the ceiling of the Pope's Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.

1. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, 144, quoted in *Michaelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*, by Ross King (Penguin Books, 2003), 179.

2. *Ibid.*, 168, quoted in *Michaelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*, by Ross King (Penguin Books, 2003), 179.



The *Pietà*, sculpted when Michaelangelo was only twenty-two years old, shows the Mother Mary holding the dead Lord Jesus in her arms. His *David*, an eighteen-foot-high sculpture carved from a single block of stone, is probably the most famous marble statue in the world. It exhibits without words the very spirit of the Renaissance: the innate beauty of the human form; the eager and youthful spirit of the age, wherein men stood upright and unafraid of what was coming at them; and the height of artistry.

Most of Michelangelo's career was spent either in Florence or Rome, depending on the political situation at the time. For example, he left Florence to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome for Pope Julius II. Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Chapel established him as one of the world's greatest painters as well, though he disliked doing the four-year project and quarreled continuously with Pope Julius II. The Sistine Chapel ceiling includes one of the world's most recognizable images—God reaching out His hand to touch the finger of the newly created Adam.

Michelangelo was also one of the longest-lived artists of the Renaissance, he died three weeks before his eighty-ninth birthday.

Raphael

Raphael was born in 1483 and died in 1520, so he lived only thirty-seven years. In his short lifetime, however, he became one of the major artists, the masters of the Renaissance. He was born in the city of Urbino, which had a small but thriving artistic court. Though orphaned at the age of eleven, Raphael still followed in his father's career as a painter with the help of his uncle and stepmother. He studied for a while in Florence and was influenced there by Leonardo's work.

Raphael's main claim to fame comes from his time in Rome, where he worked on several rooms in the Vatican for Pope Julius II. His most famous work is called the *School of Athens*, which many feel captured the essence of the classical Roman style. Raphael is known for creating superbly natural and graceful figures, and for arranging these in interesting, yet balanced, compositions.

Many saw in Raphael's works the arrival of all that earlier Renaissance painters had been striving to achieve. In addition to balance of composition and harmonious colors, he was skillful in other dominant features of the High Renaissance that were also associated with humanism; Raphael used perspective and realism to achieve a more lifelike style of art in both painting and sculpture.

Machiavelli

After many years of ruling the Republic of Florence from behind the scenes, the Medici family finally took over Florence outright. Machiavelli had opposed the takeover, so he was imprisoned and tortured by the Medicis. Many men might have resented this, but Machiavelli wrote an entire book—*The Prince*—and dedicated it to his new masters. He hoped they might give him a job as a political advisor.

Political theorists, philosophers, historians, and theologians, have been arguing about *The Prince* ever since. It was, for the time, a shocking book. For one thing, *The Prince* ignores God and His laws altogether. For another, Machiavelli argues that a monarch can and should do whatever it takes to maintain power. (The term "Machiavellian" has come to mean the same thing as the idea that "the end justifies the means.") It is better, Machiavelli wrote, for a ruler to be feared than loved.



Reviewing the Southern Renaissance

Let me review and summarize the Southern Renaissance for you. Crusades and exploration brought ancient Greco-Roman works back to Italy, and men like Petrarch reintroduced forgotten classical texts. There was excitement about classical accomplishments and art and a respect for ancient cultures and philosophers. Scholarship in the southern Renaissance predominantly focused on classical works produced by ancient Greek and Roman authors.

Delighted by the achievements and art of the classical world, southern Renaissance scholars brought to light and were deeply influenced by ancient culture and classical philosophers. Greco-Roman philosophies and ideas were perhaps so influential in part because the Roman Catholic Church had been weakened through corruption, worldliness, and schism.

During this period, even popes (who were supposed to be celibate) had mistresses and gave important church offices to their illegitimate children. They got drunk, became gluttons, and fought wars of conquest. If that was the “holy father” of the church, what was to be expected but that his faithful Christian children would imitate him? Worldliness continued to permeate the culture and the church.

Christianity had perhaps become more a matter of form and culture than a vibrant way of living, or perhaps the people of Italy were so deeply jaded with the recent behavior of popes and priests that the Gospel seemed tainted. Lacking the faithful and consistent preaching of the Gospel, and disillusioned by an increasingly corrupt Roman Catholic priesthood, Italians perhaps hoped that Greco-Roman philosophers (who, after all, had been prized by Christian Europeans for centuries) might offer deeper meaning and the opportunity for more glorious living.

In the Southern Renaissance, therefore, art that glorified human emotions, wisdom, achievements, and physical bodies, flourished. Devout piety, sobriety, modesty, charity, and other Christian virtues seemed perhaps almost like things of the past.

THE AGE OF EXPLORATION CONTINUES

The Age of Exploration is, like so many other periods, rather elastic and disputed as to its beginning and ending dates. Some say it consists of two centuries: 1400-1600 A.D. However, the first really famous voyage of the period occurred in 1488. Since a choice must be made, I will begin with Bartolomeu Dias's voyage to the Cape of Good Hope in 1488 and end with Sir Francis Drake's triumphal return from the (second) circumnavigation of the world in 1580.

These dates make up just a little less than a century, which I will survey in this chapter, describing key figures and events of the Age of Exploration. In the next chapter, I will tell you of the *conquistadores* (Spanish conquerers) and give more detailed accounts of encounters between the Old World and the New.

Latitude, Longitude, and Portolans

Let me tell you a bit about the tools of the explorer's trade. Europeans were able to sail around the world because of a number of important inventions. Some of these were new – others were new uses of older methods. Ptolemy, an ancient Greek, had created maps over a thousand years earlier with gridlines on them. These horizontal and vertical lines are what we call latitude and longitude. Latitude lines run east-west, and they measure how far north or south one is. These could be measured using an astrolabe and sextant. Longitude lines are trickier; they run north-south and help show how far east or west one is.



The tricky part about longitude is that anywhere can be used as a starting point and the distance between that starting point and where you were now is best measured by the difference in time. Without good clocks, earlier explorers had to guess about how far they'd come. They did their best to measure how far their ships sailed, but in the middle of the ocean it's hard to really measure distance since all there is water around you. That's one reason that maps from the Age of Exploration look so funny to us now.

With all their mistakes, however, those maps got explorers around the world, and of course the explorers themselves added to the maps, which they called "portolans." On the portolans, coastlines were marked in black ink; important harbors were marked in red. Portolans had intersecting compass lines that helped explorers to locate things.¹ (Later on, lines of longitude and latitude replaced these compass lines.)

Most often, the explorers would sail north or south using their compass, astrolabe, and sextant, until they found the right latitude. Then they would sail east or west depending on their goal until they reached their destination. Even with this method, they often got lost by hundreds of miles. Once they found land, they had to find landmarks like rivers and mountains that they could recognize, and those would then help them to keep going in the right direction to wherever they were going.

Discoveries and Discoverers

Thanks to navigation tools such as these, and also to their longing for the markets of the Far East, Europeans were beginning to circle the globe within thirty years of Columbus' first voyage. As you know, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain sponsored Columbus' trips to the Caribbean beginning in 1492.

King Henry VII of England sponsored his own voyage five years later, sending John Cabot to explore North America and sail down the coast of what is now Canada in 1497. As a matter of fact, Cabot became the first European to visit the northeast coast of North America. He mistook northern Canada for mainland China, but his exploration laid the grounds for England's claim to North America.

Meanwhile, Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese sailor, reached India in 1499. He had determination, keeping his crew going all the way to India, but his diplomatic skills were poor. Da Gama was willing to use cruelty to persuade native peoples to cooperate with him, and he was less than successful in handling Native American rulers.

The Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci, reached the shores of Central America that same year. Vespucci was an inquisitive explorer. Unlike other explorers, he was motivated more by curiosity than by greed for treasure. In a later voyage, Vespucci followed the coast of South America far to the south—far enough to become convinced that what Columbus had found could not possibly be islands off the coast of China.

Vespucci sent back colorful letters to people in Europe describing all the wonders of the land he explored, eventually concluding that it must be a whole new continent. In his reports, he was the first person to refer to these lands as a "New World," and the phrase has stuck ever since—as has the name America, which first appeared on a German map in 1507.

(The published versions of Vespucci's letters were arrogant and boasted about Vespucci's importance. They even contained a falsified date that made it look like he had explored South America first. This false information caused Vespucci's first name, Amerigo, to be used as a label for the new continents.)

1. Diane Sansevere Dreher, *Explorers Who Got Lost* (New York: Angel Entertainment, 1992), p. 42.



The biggest discovery after Columbus found the New World was made by a Spaniard in 1513. Vasco Nunez de Balboa crossed the narrow isthmus of Panama to become the first white man to reach the eastern shore of Pacific Ocean. Up until then, people still had some hope that Columbus had found a way to China. After Balboa, though, it was obvious that there was still a great deal of ocean between the New World and the Indies (the real India, I mean—not the one Columbus thought he discovered).

Ferdinand Magellan was the leader of the first expedition to go all the way around the world, but he never made it himself. He sailed west from Spain with five ships and 240 men in 1519. Megellan was determined to realize his dream of reaching the Spice Islands by sailing west, and he also seems to have been genuinely interested in offering Christianity to native peoples.

Magellan had a splendid vision, but he also had a serious problem. What if his crew did not want to sail around the world. Mutiny—the rebellion of a ship's crew against its captain—was a real danger. Under the law at that time, captains were the sole and ultimate authority on ships. Those who seized power from a captain by force violated the law and usually received the death penalty. However, in a desperate situation, mutiny was not out of the question.

Magellan decided to deceive his men, keeping his plans a secret even from his under-captains. As it turns out, he was right to worry, for the trip was horribly dangerous with the tools and ships available to him at that time. Only three of his ships made it through what has been known ever since as the Strait of Magellan, a passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean at the tip of South America.

Magellan thought that the Pacific Ocean was small and that he could cross it in less than a week. In fact, it took over three months until their ships reached the island of Guam. From there, the ships discovered several more islands and traded with the tribes living there. Later, Magellan was killed in a battle with a native tribe called the Mactan. Only one ship made it back to Spain—with only eighteen of the men who had left Europe three years earlier. The rest of the ships sank, and the men—222 of them—died. Exploring the world was dangerous work!

In the same year in which Magellan began his voyage of circumnavigation, Hernán Cortés visited Central America and succeeded in bringing down the Aztec Empire with a handful of men. I will tell you more about his trip in the next chapter, but I mention it here to illustrate the fact that European explorers were beginning the process of colonization in South America during the 1520's.

Meanwhile, North America was explored by sailors of several different nations. In 1525, the King of France sponsored another Italian, Giovanni Verrazano, on a quest to find a passage to China across the top of this New World. An experienced Italian seaman commissioned by the French, Verrazano explored the coastline from South Carolina to Canada without finding a passage to China, but he did discover the Hudson River, New York Bay, and Cape Cod. New Yorkers know his name well—the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, which connects Staten Island and Brooklyn, is built over the spot where he anchored his ship.

Unfortunately, Verrazano also captured some of the native people and brought them back to Europe for display. This sort of practice would prove to be a serious mistake because it justly angered the Native Americans in the area and made them more wary of Europeans. Later on, Jacques Cartier sailed for France in 1534, exploring (and naming) Canada.



While Spain claimed South and Central America, and France and England explored North America, Portugal was busily sailing the opposite direction. Remember, the Portuguese were the first great European explorers. They had gone all the way around the southern tip of Africa before Columbus ever sailed. The Portuguese kept going east, around Africa.

While Muslims and Hindus fought one another, the Portuguese took the opportunity to establish trading posts and colonies on both coasts of Africa, in India, and even in Japan, between 1500 and 1510. Goa (India), Ormuz (modern Iran), Malacca (modern Malaysia), Kochi (India), the Maluku Islands (modern Indonesia), Macau (China), and Nagasaki (Japan), were all established as Portuguese ports at this time.

If all these discoveries make your head spin, just think how the Europeans must have felt! Their horizons were expanding so quickly that it must have been quite a struggle for the mapmakers to keep up. To help keep things straight, I will give you a list of the principle discoverers who made these discoveries between about 1480 and 1580:

- ❑ Bartolomeu Dias (1450-1500) sailed for Portugal. Between 1487 and 1488, Dias led an expedition commissioned by King John II of Portugal to find a sea route to India by navigating around the southern tip of Africa. In 1488, he successfully rounded the Cape of Good Hope, becoming the first European to do so. Dias' journey laid the groundwork for Vasco da Gama's subsequent voyage to India.
- ❑ Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) sailed for Spain. Sponsored by Queen Isabella of Spain, Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492, aiming to find a westward route to Asia. On October 12, 1492, he made landfall in the Americas, landing on an island in the present-day Bahamas. This event began the Age of Exploration and connected the Old World with the New. Columbus's journey opened the door for later European exploration and colonization in the Americas.
- ❑ Juan de la Cosa (1450-1510) sailed for Spain. Between 1493 and 1510, he visited the North Coast of South America. He was the cartographer responsible for the famous Mappa Mundi (or chart of the world) produced eight years after Columbus' first voyage.
- ❑ Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) sailed for Portugal. His most famous trip (1497-1499) took him to India via Africa and around the Cape of Storms (later renamed the Cape of Good Hope). Da Gama successfully established Portuguese control of the African passage to India. (Dias also set out with de Gama in 1497 to reach India, but turned back at the Cape of Good Hope.) Da Gama successfully reached India, arriving in Calicut in 1498, and made it back to Portugal to tell the tale in 1499. He established a Portuguese presence at Kochi in India.
- ❑ John Cabot (1450 - c. 1498) sailed for England. God gave him an amazing amount of preparation for his journeys of exploration. He had experience in sailing the Mediterranean, including taking command of his own trading galley. He gained the patronage of Henry VII, who allowed him to sail in eastern, western, and northern seas. His most famous trip was to North America in 1497. He was looking for a northwestern passage to the Orient. He didn't find one, but his voyage convinced the English monarchy that the New World was both real and valuable.
- ❑ Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) sailed for Spain and Portugal. He made several voyages along the eastern coast of Central and South America from 1499-1500. He was the first person who considered America to be a separate continent. Due to the maps he created on his voyage to South America, the continent still bears his name.



- ❑ Pedro Alvares Cabral (1467-1520) sailed for Portugal. His most famous trip was to Brazil in 1500, but it wasn't on purpose; Cabral discovered Brazil accidentally when he was blown off course on the way to India. Cabral introduced Portugal to lands they did not know they possessed (according to the Line of Demarcation) and brought the land that would become Brazil under Portuguese control.
- ❑ Sebastian Cabot (1474-1557), John Cabot's son, sailed for England and Spain. He led the Company of Merchant Adventurers for the Discovery of Cathay (China). As governor of the company, he organized expeditions in the 1530's in search of a Northeast passage to China. His voyages took him to Newfoundland, possibly reaching the Hudson Bay, and also around the Eastern coast of North America, between 1508 and 1547.
- ❑ Afonso de Albuquerque (1453-1515) sailed for Portugal. He served as the second governor of Portuguese India from 1509 to 1515, and captured the strategic ports of Goa (1510) and Malacca (1511), solidifying Portuguese influence in the Indian Ocean. Albuquerque developed a strong Portuguese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, which laid the groundwork for Portuguese control in the East Indies.
- ❑ Jorge Álvares (Birth Unknown-1521) sailed for Portugal. Believed to be the first European to reach China by sea, he arrived in southern China in 1513. There, he Established a Portuguese presence on the Pearl River Delta and is associated with the early exploration of the region that would later become Macau. Álvares is known for his interactions with the Ming Dynasty and for contributing to early Portuguese contacts with China.
- ❑ Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519) sailed for Spain. Between 1500 and 1513, he visited Hispaniola and Panama. Balboa. He claimed the Pacific Ocean for the Spanish crown and set up the port of Panama. Later, Balboa was unjustly executed for treason.
- ❑ Juan Ponce de Leon (1474-1521) sailed for Spain. Among other activities, he led the first recorded European expedition to Florida (1513-1521), in which he hoped to find a mythical (as it turned out) Fountain of Youth. He also colonized what is now Puerto Rico.
- ❑ Ferdinand Magellan (c. 1480-1521) sailed for Spain. His expedition sailed around the world from 1519-1521, but he himself died en route in 1521. (Magellan was Portuguese, but because of the Treaty of Tordesillas and the resulting Line of Demarcation, the King of Portugal was unwilling to sponsor the voyage Magellan proposed because it was in "Spanish territory." Therefore, to take the route he wished to take, Magellan had to sail under the Spanish flag.) His was the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe; he proved that the world is round and can be circumnavigated, and gave an idea of its true size. Like most explorers, Magellan was eager for personal glory and monetary gain, but he was also unusually well-prepared for his expedition's epic circumnavigation of the globe by earlier experiences, particularly his trips to India, Africa, and the Spice (Maluku) Islands. He showed physical courage and fortitude throughout his career, and unusual boldness (that eventually led to his death).
- ❑ Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) sailed for Spain. Between 1519 and 1524, he visited Central America, led a successful campaign to conquer the Aztec civilization in Mexico, and thus was key to establishing the Spanish empire in the New World. This was such a risky venture that Cortes famously burned his ships to prevent a mutiny and force his followers to go forward rather than immediately sailing home again. (Even so, facing the penalty for mutiny might have seemed preferable to marching into the heart of the Aztec empire!)



- ❑ Giovanni da Verrazano (1485 - c. 1528), though Italian, sailed for France. He famously explored the American coastline from Florida to Cape Breton in 1524, and also discovered what would become New York harbor. He was killed by Native Americans on an expedition in the Caribbean.
- ❑ Francisco Pizarro (1471-1541) sailed for Spain. In 1532, he went to Panama and Peru. Pizarro led the campaign to conquer the Inca civilization. Described as treacherous and cruel, he massacred the unarmed retinue of the Incan emperor. He was assassinated on June 26, 1541, during the civil war between the Pizarro brothers and the Almagro faction in Peru.
- ❑ Pedro de Alvarado (1485-1541) sailed for Spain. Between 1519 and 1541, he visited Central America and South America. He began by accompanying Cortez to Central America, but became an explorer and conquistador in his own right, conquering hitherto unexplored territories in Central and South America.
- ❑ Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (1490-1557) sailed for Spain. Between 1528 and 1536, he visited the interior of northern Central America. After losing his fleet in the Gulf of Mexico, de Vaca was sold into slavery, and was eventually taken to the Western sea. He was eventually rescued by a Spanish slaving party.
- ❑ Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) sailed for England. Between 1534 and 1542, while sailing for France and looking for a Northwest passage to China, Cartier discovered and claimed the lands at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River that became New France. He was the first to sail through the Gulf of St. Lawrence and down the St. Lawrence River. His explorations were the genesis of French claims in Canada. Cartier was prepared for his mission from childhood: his father was a fisherman on the Atlantic, and he grew up working on the stormy Atlantic. Cartier's discoveries of the lands and waterways of the St. Lawrence Seaway became very important to the colonization and development of the interior lands of North America.
- ❑ Hernando de Soto (1500-1542) sailed for Spain. Between 1539 and 1543, he visited Cuba and the interior of the Southeastern United States looking for wealth and an ideal location for a colony. During this epic expedition, he traveled over 4,000 miles and added much to the knowledge of these territories.
- ❑ Francisco de Orellana (1511-1546) sailed for Spain. In 1540, he went to Peru, Ecuador, and the Amazon. Orellana led the expedition that first explored the course of the Amazon River. Afterwards, he was granted the right to colonize the Amazon region, but died on his journey back to the Amazon.
- ❑ Francisco Vázquez de Coronado (c. 1510-1554) sailed for Spain. Between 1540 and 1542, he visited the interior of what would become the Southwestern United States and led the expedition that discovered the Grand Canyon.
- ❑ Francis Xavier (1506-1552) explored for Portugal. Between 1545 and 1552, he went first to India and then to Japan. He was a Roman Catholic Jesuit missionary who provided the first direct account of Japan written by a European.
- ❑ Francis Drake (c. 1540-1596) sailed for England. Between 1577 and 1580, his first notable voyage explored the Pacific Coastline of North America; his second circumnavigated the world. Drake is remembered more for warring with the Spaniards than for exploring; nevertheless, he did find and explore new lands.



Ethnocentrism

If men had no sin natures, it would be a much greater pleasure to tell you about the uses that these Europeans made of their navigation tools. Imagine courageous voyages, wondrous discoveries, and joyful encounters, without having to worry about greed, pride, suspicion, or violence! Unfortunately, men *have* sin natures, and I am sorry to relate that the story of the Age of Exploration has as many dark moments as it has bright ones. Some of these can be attributed to a human vice called “ethnocentrism.”

“Ethnocentrism” is a word for a certain perspective. It is viewing one’s own culture as superior to others not on a factual basis (we must leave room for factual comparisons), but simply because they are one’s own. An ethnocentric attitude, for example, might say “my way is right because it is the way of my ancestors and my people” . . . and judge dress, manners, religion, social customs, technology, etc., accordingly.

It may surprise you a little (as it did me at first) to learn that ethnocentrism is common to all mankind. That sounds like a sweeping generalization, doesn’t it? However, there hardly seems to be a culture in all of human history that has proven exempt from belief in the inherent superiority of its own ethnic group. For example, ancient Egyptians viewed their civilization as superior, referring to their country as the “gift of the Nile” and treating other peoples with contempt.

Ancient Greeks, likewise, referred to non-Greeks as “barbarians,” considered their own language, customs, and way of life superior. The Romans referred to non-Romans as “provincials” and imposed Roman laws and customs on them. The Ancient Chinese referred to their nation as the “Middle Kingdom,” believing their civilization was the center of the world and regarding neighboring cultures as peripheral or less advanced.

In India, the ancient caste system established a hierarchical social structure, with Brahmins (priests) at the top. This system reflected a form of ethnocentrism in which certain ethnic groups considered themselves inherently superior to others based on birth. Even the Persian Empire, while known for its tolerance of diverse cultures within its vast territories, still maintained a sense of cultural superiority. Cyrus the Great, for instance, believed in the idea of cultural amalgamation but retained Persian cultural dominance.

Nor were the Americas exempt from this trend even in ancient times. The ancient Maya civilization in Mesoamerica had a hierarchical society where elites considered themselves superior to the common people. Their monumental architecture and complex hieroglyphic writing system reinforced their sense of cultural importance.

The peoples of other continents thought the Europeans’ dress, food, and habits strange (even barbaric), and vice versa. Humans of all classes on both sides both sides of the first encounters between Eastern and Western Hemispheres displayed ethnocentricity. The Europeans, at least, did so in spite of biblical teachings, for the Bible teaches that “there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11, ESV).



The message of the Bible transcends all cultures—it does not sanction one culture above all others. European ethnocentricity was perhaps, to some degree, produced by a lack of biblical literacy and also perhaps the legacy of the Crusades, in which military adventures had been understood as a way of obeying God. Many Europeans of this time may have sincerely—and wrongly—believed that their cultural, military, or individual glory was synonymous with the glory of God.

Motivations of Those Who Went and Sent

European explorers sadly showed their ethnocentricity when they claimed lands for European nations without regard to native cultures that preceded their discoveries. Often, explorers subdued, conquered, or assumed authority over indigenous cultures. They also often abducted natives of the lands they explored for the sole purpose of exhibiting them along with other oddities from foreign lands.

The explorers shared several common motives. They all had a desire to explore, which one might think of as the masculine thirst for adventure and a courageous desire to find out what was “out there.” (Whatever else one might say, they were extraordinarily brave in face of tremendous risks.) They also wanted personal glory, honor, wealth, or titles, a place in history, and perhaps to win honor for a king. Also common was a nationalistic desire to win the race against other European countries for new trading monopolies.

Many monarchs of European countries also shared common motives in sponsoring the expensive and risky voyages of exploration. They knew that great risks sometimes yield great rewards, and the rewards dangling in front of them were tantalizing enough to tempt even a crowned head of state. For one thing, there was the possibility of empire. More land meant more wealth and power. Even though no lasting colonies were established in the new lands before the 1600’s, there was always the promise of that possibility.

Even aside from the obvious lure of increased real estate and new resources of gold, etc., there were also those free trading routes to consider. Each nation’s merchants paid taxes to their monarchs for all the desirable items they brought back from foreign countries, and those taxes would help fill the national treasuries. Monarchs of this period would hoard wealth to remain financially strong and able to fight wars.

European Atrocities and Bartolomé de las Casas

The arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean marked the beginning of European colonization in the Americas. Sadly, it also marked the beginning of enslavement, forced labor, and violence against the native Taíno people. The Spanish colonization of Hispaniola resulted in the near-extinction of the Taíno population due to violence, forced labor, and diseases brought by the Europeans.

We know about many of these atrocities because of Bartolomé de las Casas, an early Spanish conquerer who eventually changed his mind about the native peoples and dedicated the rest of his life to helping them. Born in Seville, Spain, in 1484, and passing away in Madrid, Spain, on July 18, 1566, de las Casas first saw a Taíno man in 1493. Christopher Columbus brought back seven Taínos to show to Europe, and Bartolomé saw one when he was nine years old.

Pedro de las Casas, Bartolomé’s father, joined Columbus’s second voyage. In 1502, at the age of eighteen, Bartolomé himself went with his father to the Americas and participated in the conquest of Cuba. He acquired all the trappings of a conquerer, being granted land and gold and slaves of his own according to the *encomienda* system that allowed Spanish settlers to displace Native Americans to lands chosen by the conquerers. The land was supposed to remain in the Native Americans’ possession thereafter, but the settlers could demand service and tribute (in the form of food, etc.) from the displaced peoples.



At first, Bartolomé was an active participant and even advocate for the actions of the Spanish settlers. By the age of twenty-two, he had been a part of slave raids and armed violence against the Taíno people, even though he later described them as a gentle, lamb-like group of people. Much later, in 1542, he would write about those experiences in his book, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*:

“. . . from the very first day they clapped eyes on them [the native peoples] the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold, or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days. The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly. We shall in due course describe some of the many ingenious methods of torture they have invented and refined for this purpose, but one can get some idea of the effectiveness of their methods from the figures alone. When the Spanish first journeyed there, the indigenous population of the island of Hispaniola stood at some three million; today only two hundred survive.”¹

At the time, however, De las Casas seemed pleased to profit from the destruction and misery wrought by his people upon the Native Americans. With lands and slaves of his own, he returned to Spain to study church law in 1506, and by 1507 he was a priest ordained in Rome. As you shall see, at the time he saw no conflict between his role as a man of the church and the role he filled in the New World.

By 1510, Bartolomé was back in Hispaniola, and a new group of Dominican friars led by Pedro de Córdoba had arrived on the scene. They were horrified by the Spanish treatment of the native peoples, and they acted. Pedro actually *denied slave owners the right to confess sins and receive forgiveness from their priests*.

Then, in 1511, a Spanish missionary named Antonio de Montesinos (1475-1540) delivered a fiery (and brave) sermon in Hispaniola (modern-day Dominican Republic and Haiti). He condemned the Spanish colonists for their cruelty. It is said that he preached,

“Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dealt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before. Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day.”²

This was a bold move, but it didn't appear to move Bartolomé de las Casas. He argued back in favor of the *encomienda* system that so horrified the missionaries. He and the other Spanish settlers (including Diego Columbus, son of Christopher Columbus) complained of the Dominicans to the King of Spain, and the Dominicans were recalled.

Early Limitations and Transgressions

Although the Spanish king listened to the colonists and recalled the Dominican friars, it would be a great mistake to suppose that European rulers were entirely selfish and cared nothing for the cruelties being enacted upon native peoples. On the contrary, in late 1512 (one year after Montesinos' sermon), King Ferdinand II of Spain set forth the Laws of the Indies, also known as the Law of Burgos, for the governance of the Spanish colonies in the Americas. As you can see, many of these laws aimed to protect native peoples:

1. Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, translation and notes by Nigel Griffin (Penguin Group, London & New York, 1992) 1-2.
2. Witness: Writing of Bartolome de Las Casas. Edited and translated by George Sanderlin (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 66-67.



- ❑ Protection of Native Rights: The laws emphasized the duty of Spanish colonizers to protect the welfare and rights of native people. The native people were recognized as free subjects of the Spanish Crown and were not to be enslaved.
- ❑ Religious Conversion: Missionaries were to accompany expeditions to the Americas to ensure the conversion of native people to Christianity. Efforts were to be made to educate the native populations in the Christian faith.
- ❑ Limits on *Encomienda*: The *encomienda* system, under which Spanish settlers were granted labor and tribute from native communities, was regulated. The laws sought to limit the abuses within the *encomienda* system to prevent exploitation and mistreatment.
- ❑ Prohibition of Forced Labor: The forced labor of native people was prohibited, and efforts were made to prevent excessive demands on their services.
- ❑ Protection of Native Property: Native people were entitled to retain their properties and possessions. Their lands were not to be unjustly taken, and efforts were made to define and respect native territories.
- ❑ Administration of Justice: Provisions were made for the establishment of justice and legal systems in the colonies. Spanish officials were required to administer justice fairly and protect the rights of native people.
- ❑ Prohibition of Coercion in Conversion: Native people were not to be coerced into conversion to Christianity. Conversion efforts were to be conducted through peaceful means.
- ❑ Prohibition of the Abuse of Native Women: Special attention was given to protecting the honor and well-being of native women from exploitation and abuse.

If followed, the Law of Burgos would have prevented many of the atrocities—widespread murder, theft, enslavement, mistreatment, and forced conversion—that modern students of history most associate with the Spanish conquerors in the New World. Sadly, these laws were difficult to implement and enforce across the great distances involved at a time when messages, investigations, and trials could take many months to be completed. Men like Diego Columbus and Bartolomé de las Casas were powerful in the New World, and their activities were profitable. For the time being, they ignored Ferdinand II and his Law of Burgos.

Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Native Americans

One year later, in 1513, Bartolomé was serving as a chaplain in the entourage of a military expedition. Together with other Spaniards, he participated in a massacre of Native American peoples, and witnessed cruelties so terrible that they shocked even his hardened senses. Nevertheless, he was duly rewarded with joint ownership of new lands, slaves, and even gold, and divided his next few years between the life of colonial landowner and the life of an ordained Christian priest.

It seemed that Bartolomé was completely blinded to the humanity of the Native Americans and his own cruel indifference. However, in 1514, as he was preparing a sermon, he studied Ecclesiastes 34:18-22:

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and saves the crushed in spirit
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the Lord delivers him out of them all.
He keeps all his bones;
not one of them is broken.



Affliction will slay the wicked,
and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
The Lord redeems the life of his servants;
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.”

De las Casas was broken by these words. He saw that the Spanish had been utterly wrong and had done a great injustice. From that time on, Bartolomé dedicated his life to the service of native peoples in South America. He fought for their status as human beings made in the image of God, and he fought for their freedom. He gave up his *encomienda* lands, freed his slaves, and preached that others should do the same.

You can imagine how well that went! Bartolomé soon saw that it was useless to appeal to the colonists; he would have to go to Spain. Pedro de Córdoba, whom Bartolomé had once opposed so bitterly, was now his ally, and Antonio de Montesinos actually *accompanied* Bartolomé to Spain. They arrived late in 1515. De las Casas went to Charles V, then King of Spain, and began to plead for the native peoples, asking that the Law of Burgos, which had been . He would not cease to advocate for them until his death in 1566.

I wish I could tell you that Bartolomé had fully understood God’s love for all human beings, but he still had much to learn. In his early writings, he urged that African and white European slaves be used instead of Native American slaves. He thought this would be a more humane practice, partly because he was unaware that the Portuguese were carrying out terrible injustices of their own in Africa and elsewhere in the name of spreading Christianity. (Bartolomé later took back his earlier arguments and wrote that slavery of either Africans or Native Americans were equally wrong.)

In 1522, after seven years of advocating for the Native Americans, Bartolomé attempted a new and more peaceful form of colonization in South America along the coastline of what would be Venezuela. It failed. Bartolomé became a Dominican friar himself and vanished into Central America for a decade, where he served as a missionary to the Maya people and debated with colonial priests about the best ways of offering Christianity to the Native Americans. (Among other things, he strictly opposed the other priests’ common practice of destroying the native peoples’ books and writings.)

Twenty years passed. Bartolomé had been back to Spain to gather more missionaries, and he had continued to argue against the *encomienda* system before Charles V. Then, at last, a victory—in 1542, Charles V passed the New Laws. These explicitly forbade slavery, required colonial governors to care for Native Americans, and set severe limits on *encomienda*. In addition, Bartolomé was appointed the Bishop of Chiapas in the New World. Sadly, this victory also was short-lived. Spanish colonists fiercely resisted the New Laws and Bartolomé’s policies in favor of the Native Americans. They forced him to return to Spain.

Bartolomé de las Casas spent the rest of his long life serving the Native Americans in the court of Spain. He had great influence there over policies being set in place for the New World by the Spanish Crown. In 1550, he participated in the famous Valladolid Debate, arguing fiercely against Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who insisted that the native peoples were less than human and needed Spanish masters to become civilized. Bartolomé retorted that the Native Americans were *fully* human, and that there could be no excuse for enslaving them.

You may be wondering what could be the point of a story like this. After all, the Spanish colonists went on ignoring the laws and enslaving the Native Americans. Their lands were stolen; they were subjected to all kinds of cruelties; scholars even estimate that as many as ninety percent of them were killed by European diseases against which they had no defense. What was the good of Bartolomé’s efforts, and why am I bothering to tell you so much about them?



The point is, first of all, that the story of the Spanish conquest was complicated. If you have been told that no Europeans cared about or tried to help the Native Americans, you should know that this is not true. A significant number of Roman Catholic missionaries tried to defend them. Also, though their efforts were not wildly successful, Bartolomé and Pedro and Antonio did have an effect.

Whether or not the colonists admitted it, the *laws of Spain told the Spanish colonists that the Native Americans were fully human, and had rights*. The law said that the Native Americans should not be enslaved or mistreated. The law said to the colonists, “What you have done and are doing is wrong, and you know it.” Most importantly, the law acknowledged that all humans are made in God’s image.

Exploration and the Church

Christian missionaries and monks who went with the explorers denounced mistreatment of “Indians” (native peoples) by the Europeans. Men like Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos (1475-1540) urged changes. While Las Casas took his complaints all the way to Charles V of Spain, Montesinos preached against the mistreatment of the native population in Hispaniola (modern-day Dominican Republic and Haiti). He even delivered a famous (and brave) sermon in 1511 that condemned the Spanish colonists for their cruelty.

Exploration and the Popes

As I described in the last chapter, Pope Alexander VI divided the world politically between Spain and Portugal with his Line of Demarcation in 1494. When the location of the line was disputed over the years, it was never with a concern for the natives of the lands in question.

The assumption was that Europeans should have control, and the goal was to keep peace between European nations by dividing New World opportunities fairly between them. Disputes dealt only with the Europeans’ conflicting desires to colonize, control, or trade in these lands. Thus, even the popes of the era could exhibit both ethnocentricity and an improper expansion of temporal authority in their attitudes towards exploration.

Although the Line of Demarcation was an action meant to keep the peace between European countries without any apparent concern for its effects on the peoples of the New World, several popes did express strong concern about the mistreatment of native peoples in the New World during the Age of Exploration and colonization. Pope Paul III, in particular, issued influential papal bulls addressing the rights and treatment of native peoples.

For example, in an official bull called “*Sublimis Deus*” (1537), Pope Paul III condemned the enslavement and mistreatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas. He asserted that they were rational beings with souls, and as such, they should not be enslaved or deprived of their property. The bull declared that indigenous people were capable of embracing Christianity and that efforts should be made to evangelize and protect them. *Sublimis Deus* emphasized the duty of European colonizers to treat native populations justly and protect their natural rights as humans made in the image of God.

Later that same year (1537), Paul III issued his “*Veritas Ipsa*,” a brief reinforcing the principles established in the earlier bull and explicitly reiterated that indigenous people were not to be enslaved or mistreated, emphasizing their rational nature and capacity for conversion to Christianity. Unfortunately, the practical enforcement of these proclamations was difficult because of the vast distances involved, limited communication, and the influence of secular authorities in the New World.



I must tell you a bittersweet tale. The Japanese city of Nagasaki, as I told you, became a Portuguese trading post. There, a Spanish missionary named Francis Xavier (1506-1552) found the Japanese remarkably open to Christianity in 1549. He and another missionary, Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), brought the gospel to Japan and China, respectively, without committing one fatal error of ethnocentrism or combining the gospel with European culture.

Xavier and Ricci seem to have correctly understood that the gospel is universal: it is not confined to a single race, culture, or language. By respecting the cultures of Japan and China, these men were able to spread their faith within the context of Japanese and Chinese culture rather imposing their own culture upon these peoples. Xavier and Ricci hey stand in contrast to some other European missionaries who, though they appeared to have genuine concern for the souls of these nations, assumed that European culture was a necessarily corollary of Christianity.

The new Japanese Christians were joyful believers, who were eager to spread the good news across Japan. The Japanese wanted the Catholic Church to send them a bishop who could ordain Japanese believers as priests, but that was more than most Europeans could imagine. It was all well and good to baptize “savages” into the faith, said the Roman Catholic church, but only Europeans could be priests. In other words, ethnocentric pride struck again.

The decision not to ordain Japanese priests had a fateful impact—it stifled what had been a vital and growing movement in Japan. As a result, when Christianity was officially banned across Japan by 1614, and all European missionaries were expelled, the Japanese church was left leaderless. One of the few places where Christianity still flourished in Japan was Nagasaki, which was flattened by an atom bomb in 1945. Today, less than half of a single percent of Japan is Christian.

Conclusion

Machiavelli left the Middle Ages, where God and the Church played a central role in the cultural lives of many European peoples, far behind. And why not? He was writing for a new age. This was a new world with Man at center stage, complete with radical writers, warrior Popes, and conquistadores exploring and conquering the New World. The Middle Ages were history—this was the Renaissance!

Today, in secular schools and colleges, it is common for teachers and students to look closely at the evils of the Europeans while playing up the innocence of the poor native cultures they annihilated. However, one man's side always seems right until we hear the other side's story. Historically, the native cultures were no more innocent than any other civilization because each civilization is made up of fallen humans.

You already know from previous chapters in this book that the Teutonic Peoples, the Huns, the Vikings, the Celts, the Mongols, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Indians, each had their own faults and flaws. In the next few chapters, you will see many more. I must tell you of more human sacrifice, more slavery, and more greed in many different cultures.

How I wish I could tell you that the Age of Exploration was only full of good things, like European Christians taking the Gospel to a New World that joyfully received it! Unfortunately, I can't. The Age of Exploration is smeared with the blood, greed, misunderstandings, selfishness, and shortsightedness, of both the explorers and the native peoples whom they discovered.



Thankfully, human sin is not the whole story. God was also moving throughout the world, making pathways for the good news of the Gospel to reach every tribe and tongue and nation during the Age of Exploration. For example, remember the Christians in Japan? Even though that church was mostly crushed, each generation since the 1500's has had its share of believers in Japan.

Remember that in 1491, half the continents of the world—Australia, North America, and South America—had never heard the Gospel. Now, despite all the flaws of the messengers who brought them the good news, people living in two of those continents now had a chance to accept Jesus. Today, about eighty percent of South America is at least “culturally” Christian, and about half that number could be considered devout Christians. If we could ask them about it, many might say with Joseph that “what man intended for evil, God intended for good.”