Enounters in the Age of Exploration
Generations of students know that the first encounter between Europeans and Native Americans took place when Christopher Columbus “set sail on the ocean blue” for the first of his voyages to what came in Europe to be called the New World in 1492. Few students, however, are aware of the significance of the early years of the Euro-American encounter or how controversial these early cross-cultural meetings proved to be.

The importance of these early encounters is suggested by the racial mixing of Spaniards and Native Americans that occurred during its initial stages. Hernán Cortés, a conquistador who came after Columbus and overthrew the Aztec Empire, had a male child with a Native American princess the Spaniards called Donna Marina. His birth marked the beginning of centuries of racial blending that gave shape to the largely mixed race (mestizo) population of Latin America today.

The early decades of the Euro-American encounter are controversial because people today debate whether Columbus was a hero or villain. Traditionally, Europeans and Euro-Americans celebrated Columbus’s so-called discovery of the New World with a special day, Columbus Day. But Native Americans and others then and now see Columbus and his fellow conquistadors in a different light, as an evil force responsible for the enslavement and murder of their peoples. (In Native American history, Cortés’s wife is called La
Malinche, “the evil one.”) The five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage in 1993 became an opportunity for those who took the latter view to make their voices known by protesting the celebrations. Even the use of the term “discovery” in Columbus’s arrival in the New World has been called into question. What does it mean to discover a place that already has millions of people living there?

Studying the actual face-to-face encounters between Columbus (and those that followed in his footsteps) and Native Americans can provide us with a more complete history of the Columbian encounter, while also providing us with a more complete picture of the making of the modern Americas. The Columbian encounter was characterized by an imbalance of political and military power. But because cultural power is less predictable and more ambiguous than military and political power, Euro-American cultural encounters often produced unexpected results. The Spaniards dominated the Native Americans politically and militarily. But the Spaniards themselves were changed by the encounter, as they mixed culturally as well as racially with the indigenous population. Similarly, Native Americans, who were once portrayed as going to their deaths in defense of their ancient cultures, now appear to have been more pragmatic in their relations with the Spaniards. The lines drawn between the roles of the colonizer and the colonized were thus complex: fraught with many moments of cross-cultural misunderstanding and role reversals.

“INDIOS”

Native Americans were labeled by Columbus as “Indios” because he believed he had arrived in Asia at an area referred to by Europeans as the Indies because of its proximity to India. However, the word and its cognate “Indian” do a poor job of representing Native Americans then and now, describing neither their home nor ethnicity. It is only because Europeans conquered the New World that the label stuck. The term “Native American” is much more descriptive of the place and origins of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Columbus’s encounter set in motion a long-term decimation of the Native American population through warfare, virtual slavery, and disease. However, we must be careful in approaching the encounter in this way because the story of the depopulation of the New World and domination by Europeans suggests a tragic account of decline and disappearance. Native Americans did not disappear from the stage of history. Rather, their populations, after a dramatic decline, recovered and mixed with Spaniards and others. Their cultures survived, fused with Spanish culture to make a new hybrid culture that thrived in many parts of the Americas. Thus, Columbus’s encounter with Native Americans is just the beginning of the story of New World encounters that continues today.

EUROPEAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS

For several centuries before Columbus, Europeans knew little of the world beyond the Mediterranean. The book Marco Polo’s Travels, published around 1300, the story of Marco Polo’s travels from Europe to the seat of the Mongol
Empire in Mongolia and China and back to Europe via India, became for many Europeans the sole source of information about what to them was the “outside world.” The book was well known and widely read and included assessments of the grandeur of Asian empires and the great value of the region’s spices, but also included fantastic tales that much later raised questions as to whether Polo actually made the trip. In any event, Europeans saw a wealthy, if also strange and alien, world through Marco Polo’s writing. These fantastical ideas of what lay beyond Europe included sea monsters and the mythical islands of Atlantis in the Atlantic, while to the east of Europe were great riches but also the dangers of the Mongols, the greatly feared warriors from Mongolia who conquered central Asia in the thirteenth century and threatened Europe. The Mongols were seen by some Europeans as a mythical race of human monsters—the Gog and Magog.

Few Europeans traveled outside of Europe because overland travel was very slow and arduous. It took European emissaries of the Pope more than a year to reach the seat of the Mongol Empire in Karakorum, Mongolia, from Italy, and Marco Polo’s trip to China took three years. The earth was known to be round (almost no Europeans actually then believed that the world was flat) but much smaller than it really was. Because the world was actually larger than thought, estimates of sailing times to reach Asia were inaccurate. When Columbus proposed sailing west to reach the Far East, he believed it would take a few weeks. Of course, Columbus did not know that there was an entire continent in the way.

Europeans categorized some peoples from outside of Europe as barbarians. According to European thought, barbarians lacked an ordered existence, possessed no manufacturing, had no technological advancements, did not have agriculture, had no religion, and lived in forests, and therefore were fit only for conquest. While Europeans believed themselves more “civilized” and thus superior to these outsiders, many of their technological advances (such as gunpowder) and their most valuable trade came from China. Moreover, Europeans were rarely in a position of military or political superiority over any society in the post-classical world (500–1500 BCE). For instance, it was well recognized that if the “barbarian” Mongols chose to conquer all of Europe, they could easily destroy any European army, hence the great fear Europeans had of the Mongol “hordes.”

Christianity marked another distinction between Europeans and outsiders. Christianity was an aggressive expansionist religion. The Crusades (1100–1300) inaugurated a campaign to convert outsiders to Christianity and conquer foreign lands for Christianity, especially Jerusalem, which was considered the home of Christianity. In addition, the reconquest of the Muslim kingdoms (Moors) in southern Spain, which took place shortly before Columbus sailed, created an entire class of warriors (conquistadors) looking for employment and primed to slaughter foes with non-Christian religious beliefs—which they were then already engaged in doing to heretical communities and Jews in Europe. European Christians believed that their religion was the one true faith. Christianity in Europe distinguished between infidels and pagans—infidels
possessed false religion, but pagans had no religion. According to Catholic
document, conversion must be voluntary, unless the peoples were warlike, in
which case forced conversion at the point of a sword was allowed.

Native American perceptions are more difficult to uncover. Most Native
American cultures were oral cultures without written language. Thus, written
descriptions of their ideas or their world are rare. The exception to this
is the Mayan and the Aztec (Nahua) peoples, who both had writing systems.
But the Spaniards destroyed much of their writing during conquest as their
knowledge was considered pagan and thus dangerous. So we have precious
little information on which to base such an assessment. Studies of Native
American cultural practices can give us insights into their perceptions.

The Taino, sometimes referred to as Arawaks, were the first people
Columbus met on the island of Hispaniola, home of Haiti and the Dominican
Republic today. The Taino practiced extensive irrigation systems and used raised
mound agriculture. They raised cassava and sweet potatoes, and also corn but
this was less important. The Taino violated European norms by their naked-
ness. The men were naked except for an occasional loincloth and women wore
skirts only. Europeans considered nakedness a sign of barbarism and primitiv-
ity so Columbus and other explorers concluded that the Taino had no civiliz-
ation at all. The Taino also developed a ball game played in a public square
similar to a game played in other areas of Central America. This evidence sug-
gests long-range communication or migration of individuals who brought the
game to the Taino. The Taino had extensive trade networks, though on a small
scale, with other islands in the Caribbean. But they lacked the organizational
structure to provide profitable long-range trade with Europeans.

The Taino were very welcoming of Columbus and his men until they
saw or experienced the abuses arising from domination by the Spaniards.
The Taino perspective on outsiders was framed by their religion, their family
system, and their economic relations. The Taino religion had deities and
icons for worship and small household shrines; their shamans or religious
leaders were also the healers. The Taino religion was nonexclusive, unlike
the Spaniards’ Christianity. They were tolerant of others’ concept of god,
in part because their own religion had more than one god. They never
attempted to impose their religion on the Spaniards. Of course there was
little chance of this once the Spaniards began to conquer them and control
them through slavery and forced labor. Their family or kinship system also
encouraged an open attitude toward outsiders. Because trade, wealth, and
economic activity were shared and distributed via families, finding outsider-
s who could be added to the family network as fictive kin would provide
more resources and the potential for more trade for the clan, as in the case
of a war captive who might be adopted by a family as in North America
or Polynesia (Chapters 4 and 5). So outsiders represented a potential new
source of wealth for the Taino. Thus it is quite understandable that the
Europeans would have been welcomed.

That the Taino had no experience with Europeans, however, proved
to be a grave disadvantage. They did not understand Europeans’ exclusivist
religious views, diplomatic methods, or warfare. They did have some experience with hostile outsiders. The Caribs, as the Spaniards labeled them, were a warlike rival people who would kidnap war brides from the Taino. So the idea that the Taino were a naïve innocent people can be discarded, but they and other Native Americans were unfamiliar with the Europeans’ ease in resorting to violence and their implements of war. Their surprise at the use of the latter is documented in what accounts we do have of their responses when they witnessed Spaniard weapons being used.

A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has a pestilent odor, like that of rotten mud. If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within.¹

Native Americans were amazed at the sight of Spanish soldiers sheathed in metal. According to them, Spaniard horses, an animal not then present in the Americas, were magnificent, and seen as crushing the earth under their hooves. Native Americans described the Spaniard conquistadors and their war dogs in their own words.

Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues. The color of their eyes is a burning yellow; their eyes flash fire and throw off sparks. Their bellies are hollow, their flanks long and narrow. They are tireless and very powerful. They bound here and there, panting with their tongues hanging out.

The stranger bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white as if made of lime. They have yellow hair though some of them have black. Their beards are long and yellow, and their moustaches are also yellow. Their hair is curly, with fine very thin strands...²

Their surprise at Spaniards’ weapons and appearance allowed Spaniards a significant advantage in battle because they could employ these weapons before Native Americans had much time to adjust and develop a successful strategy to confront these newcomers. Thus though wary of foreign visitors in general the peaceful Taino were no match for the aggressive warlike Spanish.

**COLUMBUS AND THE ROUTE TO ASIA**

The reason Columbus sailed west from Spain and encountered the Taino was the wealth of Asia. Asia was perceived as a place of great riches by Europeans, who traded for coveted luxury items from that region, such as silk, porcelains, tea, and spices for cooking and medicine. Of these, spices were most valued. One shipload of cloves or cinnamon could bring up to 400 percent profit to the merchant who sold it in Europe.
The Silk Road, which went through Mongolia across the central Eurasian steppe, had been established as the main trade route that brought spices and other goods to Europe from China through central Asia in ancient times. Though it had fallen into disuse with the collapse of the Roman Empire, the penetration of the Mongol Empire into central Asia in the 1200s revived the Silk Road and reconnected Europe and Asia to the profit of both the Mongols and Europeans. European traders from Venice, Florence, Genoa, and other cities picked up the goods on the Black Sea and brought them into Europe; the Venetians even had a trading post on the Black Sea. But the Silk Road was again disrupted by Ottoman conquests in central Asia in the 1400s.

The Ottoman Empire was a Turkish Islamic empire that began a rapid expansion by force in the 1300s to 1400s. The loss in 1453 of the capital of the long-lived and remaining eastern segment of the Roman Empire, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), to the Ottomans was a devastating blow for Europeans who traded with Asia. It was also a blow to European Christians, as not only was Constantinople important for trade, but it was also the last major outpost of Christianity in the East. Muslim traders assumed control over a large portion of the Silk Road trade, but their rates were high and they squeezed out European traders. As a result, Europeans began to look elsewhere for trade opportunities.

After the Ottoman conquest, some Italian merchants relocated to Spain and Portugal on the Iberian Peninsula, seeking to replace the loss of the Silk Route by trading with Africa. West Africa, long connected to the Mediterranean world, had quantities of gold and slaves to exchange with Europeans. An Africa–Europe gold and slave trade already existed by 1492, but like the Silk Road, it was controlled by Muslim middlemen, which made it very expensive for European merchants. Both Portugal and Spain sought to trade directly with African kingdoms for gold, and Portugal began exploration of Africa. Prince Henry of Portugal, who had a strong interest in exploration and became known as Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), sponsored expeditions down the coast of Africa, where Columbus later made a name for himself as a slave trader financed by merchants in Genoa. Those merchants, frustrated with Muslim and Portuguese control of much of Europe’s trade, eventually bankrolled Columbus’s successful appeal at the court of Castile to further fund his voyages to the west.

The House of Castile, which then ruled Spain, believed that by finding a new route to Asia, the competition with Portugal for African trade in gold would be overcome and the profits could be used to reenergize the expansion of Christianity at the expense of their economic and religious Muslim rivals, who had effectively come to monopolize the trade with Asia. A further motivation for such exploration came from the Renaissance inquiry into humankind and curiosity about the world outside of Europe. Columbus’s own views even came into play. He was a millenarian who believed that the end of the world was approaching soon. Therefore, he wanted as much of the world as possible to be converted to Christianity before the end-time came.
Given all the obstacles to the riches of the East, it is not surprising that Europeans thought of attempting to sail west to find the Far East and its wealth. Columbus was not actually the first to think of it, but he was the first to find the route. The Portuguese had even dispatched ships eastward, but they had not found any evidence of land, such as land birds over the ocean. This deterred them, but not Columbus. He, like many Europeans interested in exploration, had attempted to calculate the size of the earth to better ascertain distances, estimating that the circumference of the earth was 17,000 miles (actual circumference is 25,000 miles). Columbus read books that gave this estimate and this boosted his confidence. He also studied maps such as Toscanelli’s map on next page. He used these data in support of his calculation that the Indies could be reached in a matter of a few weeks. But the Americas were unknown to Europeans at the time and this explains the inaccuracy of Columbus’s estimates.

COLUMBUS AND THE TAINO

When Columbus reached the island of Hispaniola, he was filled with anticipation that he would see gold-roofed buildings and the silk gowns of the Mongol ruler called the Great Khan, and also those of his people as described by Marco Polo. Upon encountering the Taino and Caribs, it became clear to Columbus that the peoples he encountered were not from the realm of the Great Khan. Columbus had not yet found Asia by going west. After a few months of exploration, the realization sunk in. He revised his plan for trade with Asia concluding that he might be able to trade with the Native Americans he met like Portugal did with Africa. But Native American trade networks were small and local, so he was not able to use the African model. Therefore, Columbus decided upon another model of expansion known in Spain from the clashes with the Moors and on the Canary islands as well: conquest.

The Moors, as the Spanish called them, were Muslims from North Africa who had come north across the straits of Gibraltar and conquered large stretches of southern Spain by 800 BCE. They brought with them Islamic culture and learning and greatly enriched the lands of Spain with irrigated agriculture, great centers of learning, and grand architectural achievements. In an interesting coincidence, at the very same time that Columbus set sail in 1492, the Spanish had just succeeded in their reconquest of the Moorish lands, pushing the Moors back to North Africa. This became a potent example for the House of Castile and Columbus. The reconquest expanded the reach of Christianity and gave Columbus and the Spanish Crown the drive to convert areas of the world outside of Europe to Christianity. It also enriched the Spanish conquerors. Many conquistadors who fought against the Moors were given some of the newly conquered lands and the use of local labor for their service to the Crown. Others had not, and they were eager to seize the property and labor of non-Christian peoples.

Columbus continued to publicly state and write that he had discovered the route to Asia long after it was clear he had not. He knew he had
MAP 1.1 Columbus’s Conception of Atlantic Ocean and Asia. Cippangu is Japan, Cathay is China. Source: Public Domain Map, Found on Wikicommons.
MAP 1.2 Columbus's Voyages to the Americas  

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raised expectations of discovery of a new route to the Far East and failure to find that route might damage his reputation. Columbus was a stubborn person and he refused to admit defeat or failure. He began a series of greatly exaggerated accounts about the New World that eventually destroyed his reputation. Columbus was also a poor administrator and his administrative failures combined with his exaggerations and unwillingness to admit that he had failed to find the riches of the Far East eventually forced the Crown to strip him of authority over the lands he found. It is a noteworthy comment on Spanish motivations in the New World that Columbus's poor treatment of Native Americans played very little role in his perceived failure, even though Queen Isabella knew of the abuses and disapproved of them. The Spanish were after wealth and power and the fate of the Native Americans they encountered was initially of relatively small concern.

The Native Americans (Taino) Columbus encountered were, according to his own description, friendly and innocent. Columbus saw them as noble savages—noble in their innocence and lack of malicious intentions, and savage in their supposed primitive way of life. Columbus believed they were completely pliable and submissive and claimed that 50 Europeans could dominate the whole island of Hispaniola, which he claimed for Spain. Columbus here illustrates the naïve and inaccurate concepts of superiority the Europeans maintained about themselves. His first words were:

I, he says, in order that they would be friendly to us—because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force—to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends, it was a marvel… They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion.³

Columbus took with him to the New World European perceptions about others who Europeans regarded as having no religion or ordered way of life. He saw Native Americans as inferior and stated that they were “fit to be ordered about and made to work.” Columbus's statement conforms to the European view that some people were natural slaves whose lot in life was to be under the control of others either as slaves or laboring in the equivalent of a modern-day labor gang, what the Spaniards called encomienda. In his public statements he continued to state that the Taino had no religion, likely because this allowed them to be defined as pagan and made their conquest easier to rationalize. However, on his second voyage, he commissioned a scholar to study the religion of the Taino, which indicated he had become convinced that they possessed religion and therefore needed to establish that theirs' was a false religion. A report by a religious scholar would accomplish this.
When Columbus explored the coasts of the island closest to Hispaniola, he took seven islanders captive to train them as interpreters. Eventually these seven and a few others were taken back to Castile. They were shown to the Crown as evidence of Columbus's discovery. Bartolome de Las Casas, who later became a powerful advocate for the Native Americans, witnessed these New World peoples among Columbus's assemblage in the Castilian city of Seville as a young man. Columbus had no qualms about taking these natives captive, since according to European thinking and the laws of the Catholic Church, they were barbarians, possessed no religion, and could therefore be compelled to do whatever Columbus wanted of them. This included his right to enslave them. One Native American stayed at the court of Castile and died soon after. Several others made their way back to the Caribbean. Another, named Diego Colon, became a loyal interpreter for Columbus. The Spanish Crown, needing the support of the Catholic Church and wary of conquistadors seizing people and lands without royal authority, took steps to protect the natives by issuing instructions to treat them well, and also to convert them to Christianity, although the first of these commands was largely ignored by Columbus and his men.

Though Columbus saw the Taino as innocents, he did not treat them with the same kind of tolerance they showed him. Columbus returned for three other trips to the New World. He still hoped to find Asia and the Great Khan of China. But he had to make the islands he had found pay. Trade hadn't worked out. So he proposed rounding up the natives and selling them as slaves. Columbus's soldiers eventually captured 1,600 Taino and made 500 of them into slaves. They forced 650 of them to serve Spanish settlers as forced laborers. The rest were freed. Soon, however, all Native Americans were forced to labor for the Spanish settlers.

Columbus also had to deal with increasing unrest among his soldiers and the rest of the Spanish settlers. Columbus was a poor administrator and shipments of supplies sometimes didn't arrive on time. Conditions were poor in the settlement and a rebellion resulted. Columbus quelled the rebellion by giving the settlers control of the labor of Native Americans. The House of Castile disapproved of enslaving of Native Americans. Isabelle even freed a cargo of enslaved Indians after she discovered they had been enslaved against her wishes. But because slavery was profitable, most Spaniards looked the other way or openly participated. A gold tribute system was also forced onto the Taino. They were forced to collect as much gold as they could from the rivers to deliver to Columbus and his men. Even the Crown could not resist the promise of more gold and though they offered protection to the Taino, they supported Columbus's gold tribute system.

By 1500, the relationship between Columbus and Native Americans—the gold tribute system, slavery, and the forced labor system—was codified. The labor and lives of the natives were controlled by the will of the Spaniards. This set in motion a pattern of abuse and control that continued well into the twentieth century under the Latin American hacienda system. Haciendas were huge privately owned plantations where Native American and mestizo (mixed race) peasants lived and worked. The owner of the hacienda believed he had the right to control the labor and the lives of the peasants who lived on his lands.
MAP 1.3 Map of Cortes Route to Tenochtitlan  Source: GNU Free Documentation License, Creative Commons Attribute
Once the Taino started to resist this abuse, Columbus changed his mind about their innocence and declared them to be warlike and dangerous. This declaration gave him the right to conquer them under the Catholic doctrine of “just war.” Whenever they resisted, the Spanish could claim that the Taino were making war on them and therefore they had the right to conquer the natives and forcibly convert them to Christianity.

There was much cross-cultural confusion in the encounter between Columbus and the Taino. Columbus and his men, who were unprincipled adventurers, made significant mistakes in understanding the Taino and other tribes. In addition to the mistaken assumption that they had no religion or civilization, his men became convinced that the Caribs, a rival tribe, participated in full-scale cannibalism, while there was little truth in this. Also, when Europeans saw the Caribs take females from the Taino, they assumed that the Caribs were taking them as slaves as Europeans might have done. In truth they were bride captives from the Taino, not slaves. While Europeans might have been appalled at bride capture, the Taino and the Caribs were more appalled at the European practice of slavery, forced labor, and forced conversion.

Columbus and others used indigenous peoples hostile to the Taino to help conquer them. They also moved to destroy the power of the Taino chiefs by making alliances with them and then turning against them. In 1503, the Spaniards convinced one of the chiefs to order a gathering of all the chiefs at his house. When the chiefs were duly gathered, the Spaniards barred the door and burned the house down, massacring the chiefs and eventually making the Native Americans submit. The forced labor system started by Columbus was institutionalized as the so-called encomienda system which consisted of royal grants of land and labor and the Taino died in great numbers because of it. Bartolome de Las Casas believed that up to 90 percent of the natives died in the gold fields after only three months.

The Spanish Crown, embarrassed by the open and great abuses to the encomienda labor system and by the widespread practice of taking the natives as slaves, asked a Spanish lawyer to evaluate whether the natives were being abused and deserved clemency. The lawyer determined that there had been abuse and only the peoples referred to as the Caribs could be made into slaves because they had made war against the Spaniards and were supposedly cannibals. But this ruling was too late to save the Taino from extinction. By 1524, there were more African slaves than Taino slaves on Hispaniola. In addition to Spanish abuses, European diseases killed up to 90 percent of Taino. By 1540, there were no Taino slaves left and by 1550 the Taino virtually disappeared. Today there are only a few mixed blood Taino who continue to practice Taino culture on the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.

**CORTÉS, AZTECS, AND CONQUEST OF MEXICO**

After Columbus, the islands of the Caribbean were quickly settled and the Spaniards began to scout and explore sections of the mainland of Mesoamerica. Hernán Cortés was a young impetuous Spaniard when he came to the Caribbean. Born into an aristocratic family in Castile, he rose in
leadership in the New World and served as mayor of the capital of New Spain (Cuba) for several years. He became an encomendero (awarded an encomienda by the Crown) but was above all an adventurer and had become a strong leader when he was chosen to be captain of an expedition to explore the mainland in 1518.

Cortés first explored the fringes of the Yucatán Peninsula. Here he met the Mayans, a more powerful and sophisticated civilization than the Taino. The Mayans sent warriors and priests to meet them. They greatly outnumbered the Spaniards, and the Spaniards fled back to their ships. Later they attacked and decimated the Spaniard soldiers. Because the balance of power was against the Spaniards they were at least temporarily in a position of inferiority and it haunted them.

After this incident, the Spaniards sent reinforcements and the Mayans allowed them to peacefully enter their cities. There was much gold which attracted the Spaniards. During this expedition, the Spaniards were rejoined by Geronimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who had survived a shipwreck and was spared by the Mayans, perhaps because of his skill with language. He had learned Mayan and when he joined the expedition, he became one of Cortés's most important interpreters.

A second Spaniard from the shipwreck, Gonzalo Guerrero, had a cultural conversion. He married a Mayan woman, had children with her, wore the tattoos and earplugs of a warrior, and became a war captain organizing attacks on Spanish ships. For some unknown reason he had turned violently against the Spanish. Possibly he felt betrayed when no one rescued him or he saw the abuses the Spaniards inflicted upon the Native Americans. Whatever the reason, he became a sworn enemy of the Spaniards. He continued to fight the Spanish and actually volunteered for a mission against them that was far from the Yucatán, in Honduras, where he was finally killed by the Spanish in 1534. Guerrero remained in the Spaniard consciousness, raising questions as to why he had turned against them and joined what they thought to be an inferior civilization. It struck "at the heart of their sense of self."

During this expedition, Cortés, after winning a battle at Tabasco, was given several young native maidens including one known to the Spanish as La Malinche or by her later Spanish name, Donna Marina. Donna Marina became the mistress of Cortés and bore him a child, but most importantly for the future of Mexico, she also became his interpreter. She was from a tribe under the control of the Aztecs and knew their language, but also knew the Mayan language. She became Cortés’s link to the subject tribes of the Aztecs. In the role of interpreter, she helped Cortés make crucial alliances with these tribes that resulted in the defeat of the Aztecs.

THE AZTECS

The Aztec Empire came into full form shortly before the arrival of the Spanish. The Aztec people, who were relative newcomers to the central valley of Mexico, came from the North American desert and were looked down
upon by the other tribes. But they brought a powerful army and successfully conquered all of central Mexico. Outlying tribes conquered by the Aztec were then forced to pay tribute in the form of labor and humans for sacrifice in Aztec religious ceremonies.

The Aztecs have been portrayed traditionally by historians as a people steeped in ritual and mysticism. This view asserts that the Aztecs believed their conquest by the Spaniards was the work of one of the Aztec gods, the Aztec destroyer god Huitzilopochtli. This narrative of Spanish conquest tells a story of a submissive, fate-oriented people. However, James Lockhart, an anthropologist, rejects the premise that the Aztecs were primitives overwhelmed by Europeans and were paralyzed by long-held prophecies of their own doom. Rather, Lockhart sees them as self-interested and pragmatic people and he uses their own writings to bear this out.

The coming of the Spanish with their unknown ways and powerful weapons was an important event for the Aztecs and they recorded what they saw as the important moments of it. However, the overall impression given by the Aztec codices (books) written after their conquest is that the Aztecs were functioning much as they were before the arrival of the Spaniards. They recorded Spanish actions only when they impacted them in some way. In much of Mexico, the conquest did not impact native lives at all.

The codices demonstrate that the Aztecs interpreted Spanish actions through their own frame of reference. They read facial features and gestures and they assumed that these outward signs were enough to interpret the Spaniards' thoughts and actions. The description of their defeat by the Spaniards, described through dialogue, is an example of Aztec self-interest and pragmatism. The focus is also on internal rivalry among the various tribes ruled by the Aztecs, putting the Spaniards in the background. Primary interest focused on one's group and how the group fared. In the Aztec empire, the fundamental form of identity was the ethnically based set of villages or towns. Everyone else was an “other” including different towns or tribes and the Spanish, whom they considered to be just one more group of outsiders.

The first massacre by the Spanish at a Toxcatl festival was a surprise attack and this stuck in the minds of the Aztecs. But the Aztecs met the situation not with doom that their world would end, but with the pragmatic calculation that these outsiders had betrayed them and could not be trusted. Therefore, they decided to wage war against them. They acted in their self-interest, not out of some preordained myth that they were being punished or were to be destroyed. The Aztecs recounted the surprise attack at the ceremony and their response this way:

When this had been done, the celebrants began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death.... They [the Spanish soldiers] ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the place where the drums were played. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor.
They attacked the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them striking them with their swords. They attacked some of them from behind. And these fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out... Others they beheaded, they cut off their heads, or split their heads to pieces.... The Sun [Don Pedro de Alvarado] treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the Captain [Cortés] left for the coast. We allowed the Captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might and that was the beginning of the war...

This new way of interpreting Aztec perceptions can help us reconsider other parts of the traditional narrative. It has been argued that the Aztecs saw Cortés with his helmet and feathered plume as the return of the Aztec creator god Quetzalcoatl and therefore treated him with the greatest adoration. Originally stated in Aztec codices, this story was taken up by historians because it fit with their view that the Aztecs were fate-oriented people. However, Lockhart suggests the argument that the Aztecs fawned over Cortés is a misleading interpretation of events. He argues that the custom of treating the newcomer royally was a matter of routine within Aztec culture and was intended to overawe the outsider with the generosity of the Aztec ruler and people. Lockhart thinks the claim that Cortés was a god was created to explain the downfall of the city and empire after the fact. The original Spanish account of the conquest contains no mention of Moctezuma treating Cortés like a god. In fact, it states that there were warnings told to the Spaniards in the towns along the way to the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan that Moctezuma had invited them into the capital city to trap them and kill them. It is unlikely that Moctezuma would have planned this if he believed Cortés to be a god. The portrayal of Moctezuma as weak and fawning in the Aztec codices, which were written many years after Spanish conquest, makes it easier to explain why the conquest happened, and it also created a scapegoat in Moctezuma himself among the Aztecs. This account of Moctezuma was written by rival peoples who wanted to blame Moctezuma for the Aztec downfall; they portrayed him as weak in contrast to their leader Itzquauhtzin, who was portrayed as virtuous and heroic.

Other evidence supports this version of the conquest. Moctezuma and the Aztecs strove to understand the Spaniards and so he sent out skilled painters to record what they saw when Cortés landed at the beach at Veracruz to learn more about these new outsiders. Later, the Spanish were allowed into the capital, Tenochtitlan, so that they could appreciate the greatness of Moctezuma. The Spanish were given a lavish welcome. Food and housing were made available to them. Moctezuma gave gold and silver objects to show his generosity and the magnificence of the Aztecs. It was also a chance for Moctezuma to observe the Spanish directly and to discern their weaknesses. None of these actions were those of a ruler who is resigned to his peoples' destruction.
When Cortés and his soldiers entered Tenochtitlan, they were amazed by what they saw. The city was larger and more populous than most European cities of that time. Tenochtitlan had beautiful gardens and baths maintained by dozens of gardeners. The water for the gardens and baths was brought to Tenochtitlan through complex irrigation canals. Remarking on the canals, Cortés stated that they were greater than in Venice. And it held riches that the Spaniards had only dreamed of, with great rooms filled with gold objects inlaid with precious stones. They were impressed by the skill of the craftsmen and the massive buildings made of stone. The female weavers and seamstresses created beautiful cloth garments made from cotton and feathers that were worn by the royalty.

But the Aztec plan to overawe the Spaniards did not work. Shortly after their entrance into Tenochtitlan, Cortés turned the tables on the Aztecs and had Moctezuma kidnapped. Spanish actions here make sense if they believed a trap was being laid for them since they could use Moctezuma as a hostage to bargain their way out of the city or attempt to intimidate the Aztecs with this bold action. The new leaders who rose in his place made war on the Spaniards and were able to expel them from the city. Once expelled, according to Aztec rules of war, the Spaniards could no longer enter the city and the Aztecs believed the threat of further attack was over.

But the Spaniards had a number of advantages in the coming war with the Aztecs. The Aztec use of conquered peoples in their empire as sacrificial victims created deep hostility against them. Cortés exploited this antagonism, forging alliances with the Tlaxcalans, Totonacs, and the other outlying tribes, against the Aztecs, which expanded his army from a few hundred to many thousands. His relationship with Donna Marina and her abilities as an interpreter were crucial to Cortés's success in rallying these tribes against the Aztecs.
The Aztec approach to war itself favored the Spaniards. The Aztecs had heard rumors that Spanish warriors did not fight fairly, at least according to the Aztec definition of fair. Aztec warriors observed a highly ritualized form of warfare in which the taking of or being made captive could become an entrance to glory and the afterlife. Captor and captive were thus expected to cooperate in this ritual. It was therefore an honor to become a captive and to die properly. The Spaniards resisted capture and so time and again they were captured in battle and then released. This frustrated the Aztecs, who had no way to gain the spiritual power of the Spaniard if they did not cooperate.

In the midst of the war, there was an outbreak of smallpox. Smallpox was a European disease that was brought to the Aztecs by the conquistadors. It created open sores or pustules which were hideous to sight and left the sufferer racked with pain. Sometimes the pustules burst in the mouth of the victim or on his lips and led to bleeding. Well over 50 percent of Aztec sufferers died and it was indeed a very gruesome death. This very contagious disease spread rapidly and decimated Aztec warriors and the rest of the population. Later, it would reduce the Native American population in the New World by as much as 80–90 percent.

The Spaniards gained the upper hand in the war by shutting off trade and contact with the city. Then they joined with their allies to lay siege to the city and the allies of the Aztecs abandoned them. The Aztec leadership refused to negotiate with the Spaniards and the Spanish-led forces destroyed the city and its inhabitants. Then, the Spaniards took the Aztec leadership captive and later had them killed.

NATIVE AMERICAN RESPONSES

Columbus and Cortés’s conquests initiated an encounter in which the power imbalance placed limits on the Native American response. Nonetheless they reacted in a variety of ways to Spanish intrusion. They openly rebelled against Spanish conquest, but rebellion eventually failed in almost every case, in part because European diseases spread so quickly that warriors fell from disease more often than from Spanish swords. The Spanish also possessed firearms which intimidated Native Americans and were more effective than arrows and spears. Perhaps most important were the alliances between the Spaniards and the tributary tribes. These alliances allowed the Spaniards to increase the numbers of soldiers and warriors fighting on their side dramatically.

Accommodation was perhaps the most widespread response to the Spanish. Many Native Americans eventually accepted Spanish rule and tried to make the best of it. For instance, the Spanish forced Native Americans to convert to Christianity. Instead of openly resisting Christianity, many Native Americans practiced syncretism, a method of combining aspects of Christianity with their own religious practices. They identified the Catholic saints with their native gods in some cases. The Mayans combined prayers to the Christian god with rituals to their agricultural deities. The Christian cross was sometimes covered with traditional religious cloth, the huipil, which allowed Mayans to practice both Christianity and their traditional religion.
The Christian religious holiday “All Saints’ Day” or “All Hollows Eve” (today the Western Halloween) became very important to Native Americans because they could celebrate the Catholic saints while also worshipping their ancestors by placing food offerings at their tombs. All Saints’ Day is still celebrated following Mayan custom through the building of altars of remembrance in their homes and bringing food and/or flowers to the cemeteries where loved ones are buried, accompanied by parades in which celebrants often wear costumes ranging from traditional skeletons to SpongeBob SquarePants.

**FIGHTING FOR THE NATIVE AMERICANS: LAS CASAS**

The life and story of Bartolome de Las Casas runs counter to the misdeeds of the Spaniards in the Americas. Las Casas, who was born in Seville and saw the natives Columbus brought back from his first expedition there, knew Columbus and became editor of Columbus’s journals. He went to the Indies in 1502, participated in several expeditions, and was given an encomienda over natives on the island of Hispaniola. After seeing firsthand the ill-treatment of the Taino in the encomienda, Las Casas began to have second thoughts about the actions of the Spanish.

Intensely religious, Las Casas began to evangelize the Indians under his encomienda. In 1511 he heard a sermon by Father Montesinos on the biblical subject “a voice crying in the wilderness,” which was a condemnation
The contact between Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans eventually produced large numbers of castas, people considered to be of mixed racial origin. By the eighteenth century, especially in New Spain, a genre of painting flourished that depicted a husband and wife of different racial categories and their child who would fit one of the casta designations. The purpose and public for these paintings is unclear, but they illustrate domestic relations and material culture as well as racial ideology. Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlan, Mexico. Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY.
of the Spaniards' treatment of Native Americans in the New World. It was a transformational moment for Las Casas. He freed the Indians under his control and abandoned his encomienda.

From then on, Las Casas became the defender of the Indians. In 1512, he became the first priest to be ordained in the New World. Las Casas proposed to the Spanish King Charles that he be allowed to set up a self-supporting farm for freed Native Americans in Venezuela. This experiment failed when the neighboring encomenderos incited other Native Americans to continuously attack the farms. He wrote books exposing and decrying the abuses of the Spanish. In 1537 he convinced the Pope to issue a papal bull declaring that the Indians were rational beings so as to end the practices supported by the argument that because the New World Native Americans appeared to them to be without intellect, they needed to be enslaved under the will of the Spanish.

In 1550, Las Casas arranged for a debate between himself and Juan Gines de Sepulveda in Valladolid Spain over the enslavement of Native Americans. Sepulveda was an Aristotelian scholar who subscribed to Aristotle's arguments that there were two different kinds of men—educated men who were fit to become educated and to lead and natural men who were only fit to be slaves. Las Casas won the debate and the blessing of the Council of Valladolid composed of theologians. King Charles, who wanted to reduce the power of the encomenderos and bring them under the control of the Crown, also supported Las Casas and declared enslavement of Native Americans illegal. In addition, the encomienda was eventually abolished. However, the abuse of Native Americans continued and the hacienda system which emerged in the late 1500s was yet another system that kept them under the control of Spanish overlords, who retained control of the land and developed great wealth and power. The hacienda system has disappeared today, but its legacy can be seen in the great disparity of wealth between the richest and the poorest in Latin America.

Conclusion

The Spaniards eventually conquered much of Latin America, although it took more than 100 years to quell the most stubborn resistance of Native Americans such as among the Maya in southern Mexico. Although the conquest was brutal and there was much suffering and death, the encounter also produced widespread mixing of peoples. The physical mixing that began with Native Americans intermarrying with Spaniards (whose offspring was labeled mixed, or mestizo) became over time a complex hybrid of European, Native American, and mestizo ethnicities to which was added African culture, after many of Africa's peoples were introduced to the region via the Atlantic slave trade. All contributed to the rich culture of today's Latin America. This cultural mix also helped shape western and global culture through contact with Latin American literature, music, art, and religion. Latin American literature's "magical realism," which is a product of its ethnic hybridity, is a theme
that has been mined by authors globally. The Latin American contribution to the artistic school of muralism is an example of the use of European and Native American forms to produce innovative art. Some Latin American music uses a special flute that is indigenous to the New World, but beloved everywhere, while Salsa music, which has African influences, is appreciated the world over. Religious syncretism continues today among the Mayan populations of Mexico and Guatemala and in Brazil. The mixing of indigenous and European Catholic elements has produced unique religious institutions and symbols. For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most popular religious icon in Latin America today, is a product of Spanish-indigenous syncretism. So the legacy of the encounter between Spaniards and Native Americans grew to be more than just conquest. It became a story of the survival of Native American culture and the fusion of indigenous Spanish and ultimately African culture in the Americas and the world.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were European perceptions of the world beyond Europe at the time of Columbus?
2. What were Native American perceptions of the Spaniards who arrived in the New World?
3. What motivated Columbus and the kingdom of Castile to make this voyage to the Americas? What did Columbus expect to find?
4. What were the different models available in Columbus’s approach to forming an economic and political relationship with the Native Americans he encountered in the New World? Which of these did Columbus decide to pursue? Describe the Spanish treatment of Native Americans that resulted from this decision and from European assumptions about the nature of these New World peoples that influenced this decision.
5. Describe the culture of the Taíno Columbus encountered. How did they respond to the Spanish intrusion?
6. What were the key elements in Cortés’s conquest of the Aztecs?
7. How did the Aztecs respond to Cortés’s intrusion?
8. Describe Las Casas’s attempts to protect Native Americans from Spanish abuses.

Endnotes

2. Ibid., p. 48.
5. Ibid., pp. 48–49.