

## Early Contact in North and South America

A number of ancient civilizations existed in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Some historians maintain that as many as 100 million people populated the Americas at that time. Most of these cultures had highly developed political and social structures. These groups shared a number of characteristics, most notably a reliance on trading and kinship. They differed in their religious beliefs, and in their forms of transportation, housing and social structures.

These groups were brought into contact with the societies across the Atlantic as a direct result of one incident: in 1490, Constantinople, the gateway to the East, fell to the Turks. Because trade routes to the Orient were now blocked, Europeans needed a new route for transporting the valuable goods they had come to rely on. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, searching for a new route to the Orient, arrived in what we now know as America.

Over the next 50 years, Spanish, Portuguese, French and British explorers arrived on the shores of America, spurred on by the 3C's of exploration—curiosity, commerce and Christianity.

1. *Curiosity*—the opportunity to learn about the world. Creativity, rational inquiry and the desire to learn were replacing an unquestioning belief in the status quo (i.e., the world as it was) in the social and intellectual movement of the Renaissance. This openness to new ideas, explanations and experiences encouraged early exploration.
2. *Commerce*—the opportunity to make money through the trade of valuable resources. Although the first explorers were looking for a quick trade route to the Orient, after the Spanish discovered huge silver deposits in Central America, all of North and South America became a target, in itself, for those hoping to get rich. Many early explorers not only sought riches but the “glory” that would be theirs on their return to Europe.
3. *Christianity*—the opportunity to spread the Christian faith to the indigenous peoples. As trade and knowledge of the land across the ocean increased, many Europeans saw these new lands in religious and spiritual terms. Europe was deeply religious in the 16th and 17th centuries, and many Europeans thought that God was leading their people to the promised land by directing them to a place where they might save the souls of people who had not heard of God or Jesus Christ. The Spanish government believed that missionaries were needed to convert and civilize the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

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