

CONFRONTATION OF CULTURES



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THIS chapter will examine some aspects of the encounters between Europeans and the people of the Americas between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Some Europeans ventured out on unknown oceans in order to find trading routes to areas where spices and silver were to be obtained. The first to do this were the Spanish and the Portuguese. They persuaded the Pope to give them the exclusive right to rule over any new regions they might locate. Christopher Columbus, an Italian, sponsored by the rulers of Spain, sailed west in 1492, and thought that the lands he had reached were 'the Indies' (India and countries east of India about which he had read in the Travels of Marco Polo).

Later exploration indicated that the 'Indians' of the 'New World' actually belonged to different cultural groups and were not part of Asia. Two types of culture were to be found in the Americas. There were small subsistence economies in the Caribbean region and in Brazil. There were also powerful monarchical systems based on well-developed agriculture and mining. These, like the Aztecs and Mayas of central America and the Incas of Peru, also had monumental architecture.

The exploration and later the settlement of South America were to have disastrous consequences for the native people and their cultures. It also marked the beginning of the slave trade, with Europeans selling slaves from Africa to work in plantations and mines in the Americas.

European conquest of the people of America was accompanied by the ruthless destruction of their manuscripts and monuments. It was only in the late nineteenth century that anthropologists began to study these cultures. Still later, archaeologists found the ruins of these civilisations. The Inca city of Machu Picchu was rediscovered in 1911. Recently, photographs taken from the air have shown traces of many cities now covered by forest.

By contrast, we know the European side of the encounters in great detail. The Europeans who went to the Americas kept log-books and diaries of their journeys. There are records left by officials and Jesuit missionaries (see Theme 7). Europeans wrote about their 'discovery' of the Americas, and when histories of the countries of America were written, these were in terms of *European* settlements, with little reference to the local people.

People have been living in North and South America and nearby islands for thousands of years, and many migrations from Asia and from the South Sea Islands have taken place over time. South America was (and still is, in parts) densely forested and mountainous, and the Amazon, the world's largest river, flows through miles of dense forest. In Mexico, in central America, there were densely settled areas of habitation along the coast and in the plains, while elsewhere villages were scattered over forested areas.

Communities of the Caribbean and Brazil

The Arawakian Lucayos lived on a cluster of hundreds of small islands in the Caribbean Sea, today known as the Bahamas, and the Greater Antilles. They had been expelled from the Lesser Antilles by the Caribs, a fierce tribe. In contrast to them, the Arawaks were a people who preferred negotiation to conflict. Skilled boat-builders, they sailed the open sea in dugout canoes (canoes made from hollow tree trunks). They lived by hunting, fishing and agriculture, growing corn, sweet potatoes, tubers and cassava.

A central cultural value was the organisation of people to produce food collectively and to feed everyone in the community. They were organised under clan elders. Polygamy was common. The Arawaks were animists. As in many other societies, shamans played an important role as healers and intermediaries between this world and that of the supernatural.

Animists believe that even objects regarded by modern science as 'inanimate' may have life or a soul.



MAP 1: Central America and the Caribbean Islands

ACTIVITY 1

Discuss the differences between the Arawaks and the Spanish. Which of these differences would you consider most significant and why?

The Arawaks used gold for ornaments, but did not attach the value to the metal that the Europeans did. They were quite happy to exchange gold for glass beads brought by the Europeans, because these seemed so much more beautiful. The art of weaving was highly developed – the hammock was one of their specialities, and one which captured the imagination of the Europeans.

The Arawaks were generous and were happy to collaborate with the Spanish in their search for gold. It was when Spanish policy became brutal that they were forced to resist, but this was to have disastrous consequences for them. Within twenty-five years of contact with the Spanish very little remained of the Arawaks or their way of life.

People called the Tupinamba lived on the east coast of South America, and in villages in the forests (the name 'Brazil' is derived from the brazilwood tree). They could not clear the dense forests for cultivation as they had no access to iron. But they had a healthy and plentiful supply of fruits, vegetables and fish, and so did not have to depend on agriculture. The Europeans who met them envied their happy freedom, with no king, army or church to regulate their lives.

The State Systems of Central and South America

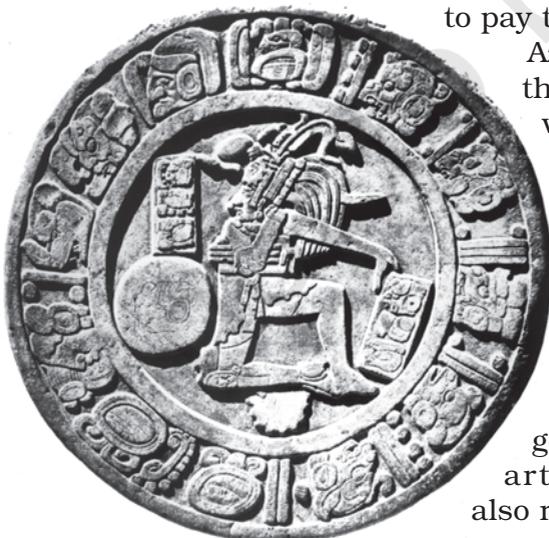
In contrast to the Caribbean and Brazil, there were some highly organised states in central America. There was a generous surplus of corn, which provided the basis for the urbanised civilisations of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas. The monumental architectural remains of these cities continue to mesmerise visitors today.

The Aztecs

In the twelfth century, the Aztecs had migrated from the north into the central valley of Mexico (named after their god Mexitli). They expanded their empire by defeating different tribes, who were forced to pay tribute.

Aztec society was hierarchical. The nobility included those who were nobles by birth, priests, and others who had been awarded the rank. The hereditary nobility were a small minority who occupied the senior positions in the government, the army and the priesthood. The nobles chose from among them a supreme leader who ruled until his death. The king was regarded as the representative of the sun on earth. Warriors, priests and nobles were the most respected groups, but traders also enjoyed many privileges and often served the government as ambassadors and spies. Talented artisans, physicians and wise teachers were also respected.

A ball-court marker, with inscribed dates, Maya culture, Chiapas, sixth century.



Since land was limited, the Aztecs undertook reclamations. They made *chinampas*, artificial islands, in Lake Mexico, by weaving huge reed-mats and covering them with mud and plants. Between these exceptionally fertile islands, canals were constructed on which, in 1325, was built the capital city Tenochtitlan. Its palaces and pyramids rose dramatically out of the lake. Because the Aztecs were frequently engaged in war, the most impressive temples were dedicated to the gods of war and the sun.

The empire rested on a rural base. People cultivated corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, manioc root, potatoes and other crops. Land was owned not by individuals but by clans, which also organised public construction works. Peasants, like European serfs, were attached to lands owned by the nobility and cultivated them in exchange for part of the harvest. The poor would sometimes sell their children as slaves, but this was usually only for a limited period, and slaves could buy back their freedom.

The Aztecs made sure that all children went to school. Children of the nobility attended the *calmecac* and were trained to become military and religious leaders. All others went to the *tepochcalli* in their neighbourhood, where they learned history, myths, religion and ceremonial songs. Boys received military training as well as training in agriculture and the trades. Girls were trained in domestic skills.

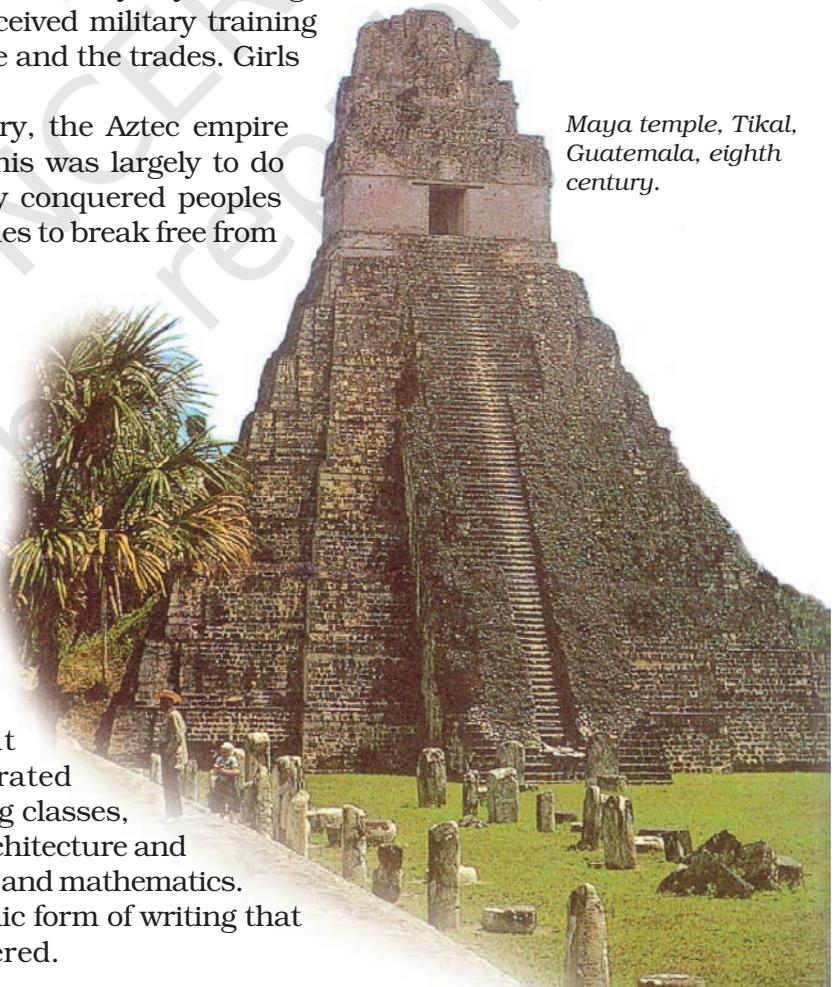
In the early sixteenth century, the Aztec empire was showing signs of strain. This was largely to do with discontent among recently conquered peoples who were looking for opportunities to break free from central control.

The Mayas

The Mayan culture of Mexico developed remarkably between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, but in the sixteenth century they had less political power than the Aztecs. Corn cultivation was central to their culture, and many religious ceremonies were centred on the planting, growing and harvesting of corn. Efficient agricultural production generated surplus, which helped the ruling classes, priests and chiefs to invest in architecture and in the development of astronomy and mathematics. The Mayas devised a pictographic form of writing that has only been partially deciphered.

Reclamation is the conversion of wasteland into land suitable for habitation or cultivation.

Maya temple, Tikal, Guatemala, eighth century.



The Incas of Peru

The largest of the indigenous civilisations in South America was that of the Quechuas or Incas in Peru. In the twelfth century the first Inca, Manco Capac, established his capital at Cuzco. Expansion began under the ninth Inca and at its maximum extent the Inca empire stretched 3,000 miles from Ecuador to Chile.

The empire was highly centralised, with the king representing the highest source of authority. Newly conquered tribes were absorbed effectively; every subject was required to speak Quechua, the language of the court. Each tribe was ruled independently by a council of elders, but the tribe as a whole owed its allegiance to the ruler. At the same time, local rulers were rewarded for their military co-operation. Thus, like the Aztec empire, the Inca empire resembled a confederacy, with the Incas in control. There are no precise figures of the population, but it would seem that it included over a million people.

Like the Aztecs, the Incas too were magnificent builders. They built roads through mountains from Ecuador to Chile. Their forts were

built of stone slabs that were so perfectly cut that they did not require mortar. They used labour-intensive technology to carve and move stones from nearby rock falls. Masons shaped the blocks, using an effective but simple method called flaking. Many stones weighed more than 100 metric tons, but they did not have any wheeled vehicles to transport these. Labour was organised and very tightly managed.

The basis of the Inca civilisation was agriculture. To cope with the infertile soil conditions, they terraced hillsides and developed systems of drainage and irrigation. It has been recently pointed out that in 1500, cultivation in the Andean highlands was much greater than what it is today. The Incas grew corn and potatoes, and reared llamas for food and labour.

Their weaving and pottery were of a high quality. They did not develop a system of writing. However, there was an accounting system in place – the *quipu*, or cords upon which knots were made to indicate specific mathematical units. Some scholars now suggest that the Incas wove a sort of code into these threads.

MAP 2: South America



Most visitors today wonder at the arts and skills of the Incas. However, there are some like the Chilean poet Neruda, who thought of the hours of hard work that thousands of people must have been forced to put in. And all that to achieve such high levels of agricultural output, such remarkable architecture, and such exquisite crafts, in this difficult environment.

*'Look at me from the depths of the earth,
tiller of fields, weaver, reticent shepherd,
...
mason high on your treacherous scaffolding,
iceman of Andean tears,
jeweler with crushed fingers,
farmer anxious among his seedlings,
potter wasted among his clays –
bring to the cup of this new life
your ancient buried sorrows.
Show me your blood and your furrow;
say to me: here I was scourged
because a gem was dull or because the earth
failed to give up in time its tithe of corn or stone.'*

– Pablo Neruda (1904-73), *The Heights of Machu Picchu*, 1943.

The hilltop town of Machu Picchu. It escaped the notice of the Spaniards and was therefore not destroyed.



The organisation of the Inca empire, with its pyramid-like structure, meant that if the Inca chief was captured, the chain of command could quickly come apart. This was precisely what happened when the Spaniards decided to invade their country.

The cultures of the Aztecs and Incas had certain features in common, and were very different from European culture. Society was hierarchical, but there was no private ownership of resources by a few people, as in Europe. Though priests and shamans were accorded an exalted status, and large temples were built, in which gold was used ritually, there was no great value placed on gold or silver. This was also in marked contrast to contemporary European society.

Voyages of Exploration by Europeans

The people of South America and the Caribbean got to know of the existence of European people when the latter began to sail across the Atlantic Sea. The magnetic compass, which helped identify the cardinal points accurately, had been known since 1380, but only in the fifteenth century did people use it when they ventured on voyages into unknown areas. By this time many improvements had been made in European sailing ships. Larger ships were built, that could carry a huge quantity of cargo as well as equipment to defend themselves if attacked by enemy ships. The circulation of travel literature and books on cosmography and geography created widespread interest right through the fifteenth century.

ACTIVITY 2

Examine a detailed physical map of South America. To what extent do you think geography influenced the developments of the Inca empire?

Cosmography was understood as the science of mapping the universe. It described both heaven and Earth, but was seen as distinct from geography and astronomy.

In 1477, Ptolemy's *Geography* (written 1,300 years earlier) became available in print (see Theme 7) and thus came to be widely read. According to Ptolemy, an Egyptian, the regions of the world were arranged in terms of latitudes and longitudes. Reading these texts gave Europeans some knowledge of the world, which they understood to have three continents, namely, Europe, Asia and Africa. Ptolemy had suggested that the world was spherical, but he underestimated the width of the oceans. Europeans had no idea of the distance they would have to travel in the Atlantic before they reached land. Since they imagined it would be a short voyage, there were many who were ready to venture forth recklessly beyond the known seas.

People from the Iberian peninsula – the Portuguese and the Spanish – were the pioneers in the fifteenth-century voyages of exploration. For a long time these were called 'voyages of discovery'. Later historians, however, argued that these were *not* the first voyages that people of the "Old World" made to lands unknown to them. Arabs, Chinese and Indians had navigated vast stretches of ocean, and sailors from the Pacific Islands (the Polynesians and Micronesians) had made major ocean crossings. The Vikings of Norway had reached North America in the eleventh century.

Why were Spanish and Portuguese rulers in particular so receptive to the idea of funding a maritime quest? What produced such a passion for gold and treasure and for glory and titles? One may find the answers in a combination of three motives: economic, religious and political.

The European economy went through a decline from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries (see Theme 6). Plague and wars led to depopulation in many parts of Europe, trade grew slack, and there was a shortage of gold and silver, used for making European coins. This situation was in stark contrast to the preceding period (from the eleventh to the mid-fourteenth centuries) when growing trade had supported Italian city-states and led to the accumulation of capital. In the late fourteenth century, long-distance trade declined, and then became difficult after the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453. Italians managed to do business with Turks, but were now required to pay higher taxes on trade.

The possibility that many more people could be brought into the fold of Christianity made many devout Christian Europeans ready to face adventure.

As it happened, the 'Crusades' against the Turks (see Theme 4) began as a religious war, but they increased Europe's trade with Asia and created a taste for the products of Asia, especially spices. If trade could be followed by political control, with European countries establishing 'colonies' in regions with a warmer climate, they would benefit further.

When thinking of new regions where gold and spices might be found, one possibility was West Africa, where Europeans had not traded directly so far. Portugal, a small country which had gained independence from

Spain since 1139, and which had developed fishing and sailing skills, took the lead. Prince Henry of Portugal (called the Navigator) organised the coasting of West Africa and attacked Ceuta in 1415. After that, more expeditions were organised, and the Portuguese established a trading station in Cape Bojador in Africa. Africans were captured and enslaved, and gold dust yielded the precious metal.

In Spain, economic reasons encouraged individuals to become knights of the ocean. The memory of the Crusades and the success of the *Reconquista* fanned private ambitions and gave rise to contracts known as *capitulaciones*. Under these contracts the Spanish ruler claimed rights of sovereignty over newly conquered territories and gave rewards to leaders of expeditions in the form of titles and the right to govern the conquered lands.

The Atlantic Crossing

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was a self-taught man who sought adventure and glory. Believing in prophecies, he was convinced that his destiny lay in discovering a route to the East (the 'Indies') by sailing westwards. He was inspired by reading *Imago Mundi* (a work on astronomy and geography) by Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly written in 1410. He submitted his plans to the Portuguese Crown, only to have them turned down. He had better luck with the Spanish authorities who sanctioned a modest expedition that set sail from the port of Palos on 3 August 1492.

Nothing, however, prepared Columbus and his crew for the long Atlantic crossing that they embarked upon, or for the destination that awaited them. The fleet was small, consisting of a small *nao* called *Santa Maria*, and two caravels (small light ships) named *Pinta* and *Nina*. Columbus himself commanded the *Santa Maria* along with 40 capable sailors. The outward journey enjoyed fair trade winds but was long. For 33 days, the fleet sailed without sight of anything but sea and sky. By this time, the crew became restive and some of them demanded that they turn back.

On 12 October 1492, they sighted land; they had reached what Columbus thought was India, but which was the island of Guanahani in the Bahamas. (It is said that this name was given by Columbus, who described the Islands as surrounded by shallow seas, *bajamar* in Spanish.) They were welcomed by the Arawaks, who were happy to share their food and provisions; in fact, their generosity made a deep impression upon Columbus. As he wrote in his log-book, 'They are so ingenuous and free with all they have, that no one would believe it who has not seen of it, anything they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no, on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it'.

Columbus planted a Spanish flag in Guanahani (which he renamed San Salvador), held a prayer service and, without consulting the local

Reconquista was the military reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula by Christian kings from the Arabs in 1492.

Nao means a heavy ship in Spanish. It is derived from Arabic, and this is explained by the fact of Arab occupation of the region till 1492.



Europeans meet native Americans – a European woodblock print, sixteenth century.

people, proclaimed himself viceroy. He enlisted their cooperation in pressing forward to the larger islands of Cubanacan (Cuba, which he thought was Japan!) and Kiskeya (renamed Hispaniola, today divided between two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Gold was not immediately available, but the explorers had heard that it could be found in Hispaniola, in the mountain streams in the interior.

But before they could get very far, the expedition was overtaken by accidents and had to face the hostility of the fierce Carib tribes. The men clamoured to get back home. The return voyage proved more difficult as the ships were worm-eaten and the crew tired and homesick. The entire voyage took 32 weeks. Three more voyages followed, in the course of which Columbus completed his explorations in the Bahamas and the Greater Antilles, the South American mainland and its coast. Subsequent voyages revealed that it was not the 'Indies' that the Spaniards had found, but a new continent.

Columbus's achievement had been to discover the boundaries of what seemed like infinite seas and to demonstrate that five weeks' sailing with the trade wind took one to the other side of the globe. Since places are often given the names of individuals, it is curious that Columbus is commemorated only in a small district in the USA and in a country in north-western South America (Columbia), though he did not reach either of these areas. The two continents were named after Amerigo Vespucci, a geographer from Florence who realised how large they might be, and described them as the 'New World'. The name 'America' was first used by a German publisher in 1507.

'Viceroy' means in place of the king (in this case the King of Spain).

Voyages by Europeans

1492	<i>Columbus claims Bahama Islands and Cuba for Spain</i>
1494	<i>The 'undiscovered world' divided between Portugal and Spain</i>
1497	<i>John Cabot, Englishman, explores North American coast</i>
1498	<i>Vasco da Gama reaches Calicut/Kozhikode</i>
1499	<i>Amerigo Vespucci sights South American coast</i>
1500	<i>Cabral claims Brazil for Portugal</i>
1513	<i>Balboa crosses Panama Isthmus, sights Pacific Ocean</i>
1521	<i>Cortes defeats Aztecs</i>
1522	<i>Magellan circumnavigates the globe</i>
1532	<i>Pizarro conquers Inca kingdom</i>
1571	<i>Spanish conquer the Philippines</i>
1600	<i>British East India Company formed</i>
1602	<i>Dutch East India Company formed</i>

ACTIVITY 3

What according to you were the reasons for people from different European countries wanting to take the risk of going on a 'voyage of discovery'?

Spain Establishes an Empire in America

Spanish expansion was based on a display of military strength with the use of gunpowder and of horses. The local people were compelled either to pay tribute or to work in gold and silver mines. The initial discovery was typically followed by establishing a small settlement, peopled by a few Spaniards who supervised the labour of the local inhabitants. Local chieftains were enlisted to explore new lands and, hopefully, more sources of gold. The greed for gold led to violent incidents provoking local resistance. The Spanish friar Bartolome de las Casas, the most severe critic of the Spanish conquerors, observed that the Spanish often tested their swords on the naked flesh of the Arawaks.

To military repression and forced labour was added the ravages of disease. The diseases of the Old World, particularly smallpox wreaked havoc on the Arawaks whose lack of immunity resulted in large-scale deaths. The local people imagined these diseases were caused by 'invisible bullets' with which the Spaniards attacked them. The extinction of the Arawaks and all traces of their way of life is a silent reminder of their tragic encounter with Spaniards.

The expeditions of Columbus were followed by a sustained and successful *exploration* of Central and South America. Within half a century, the Spanish had explored and laid claim to a vast area of the western hemisphere, from approximately latitudes 40 degrees north to 40 degrees south, without anyone challenging them.

Before this, the Spanish conquered lands of two great empires of the region. This was largely the work of two individuals: Hernan Cortes (1488-1547) and Francisco Pizarro (1478-1541). Their explorations were financed by members of the landed gentry in Spain, officials of municipal councils and noblemen. Those joining the expeditions supplied their own equipment in exchange for a share of the booty they expected from the conquests.

Cortes and the Aztecs

Cortes and his soldiers (called *conquistadores*) conquered Mexico swiftly and ruthlessly. In 1519, Cortes set sail from Cuba to Mexico, where he made friends with the Totonacs, a group who wanted to secede from Aztec rule. The Aztec king, Montezuma, sent an official to meet him. He was terrified at the aggressiveness of the Spanish, their gunpowder and their horses. Montezuma himself was convinced that Cortes was the reincarnation of an exiled god who had returned to avenge himself.

Dona Marina

Bernard Diaz del Castillo (1495-1584) wrote in his True History of the Conquest of Mexico that the people of Tabasco gave Cortes a woman attendant called Dona Marina. She was fluent in three local languages, and was able to play a crucial role as interpreter for Cortes. 'This was the great beginning of our conquests, and without Dona Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico.'

Diaz thought she was a princess, but the Mexicans called her 'Malinche', a word meaning 'betrayal'. Malinchista means someone who slavishly copies the costumes and language of another people.

Bernard Diaz wrote:

'And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico City, we were astounded. These great towns and buildings rising from the water all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not a dream.'

The Spaniards pressed against the Tlaxcalans, fierce fighters who submitted only after a stiff resistance. The Spaniards proceeded to massacre them cruelly. Then they marched to Tenochtitlan, which they reached on 8 November 1519.

The invading Spaniards were dumbstruck at the sight of Tenochtitlan. It was five times larger than Madrid and had 100,000 inhabitants, twice the population of Seville, Spain's largest city.

Cortes was cordially received by Montezuma. The Aztecs led the Spaniards into the heart of the city, where the Emperor showered them with gifts. His people were apprehensive, having heard of the massacre of the Tlaxcalans. An Aztec account described the situation: 'It was as though Tenochtitlan had given shelter to a monster. The people of Tenochtitlan felt as if everyone had eaten stupefying mushrooms... as if they had seen something astonishing. Terror dominated everyone, as if all the world were being disemboweled... people fell into a fearful slumber.'

The fears of the Aztecs proved to be well founded. Cortes without any explanation placed the Emperor under house arrest and attempted to rule in his name. In an attempt to formalise the Emperor's submission to Spain, Cortes installed Christian images in the Aztec temple. Montezuma, on his part, suggested a compromise and placed both Aztec and Christian images in the temple.

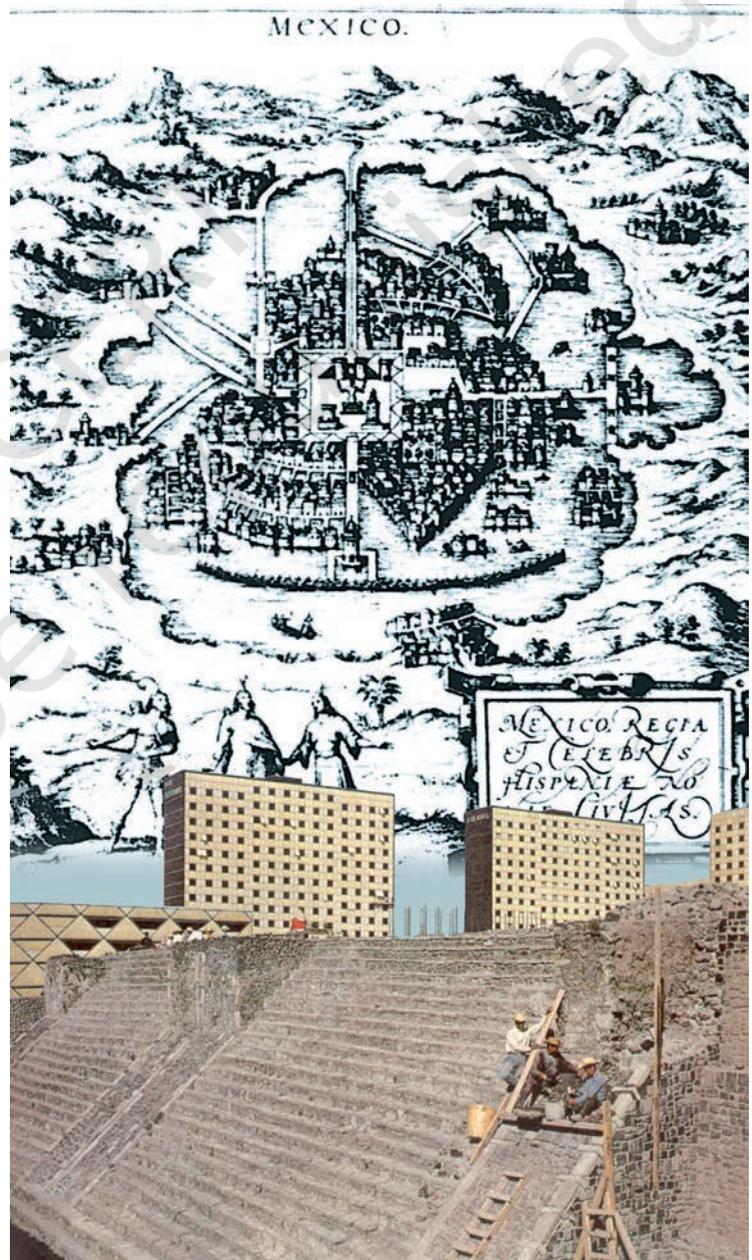
At this point, Cortes had to leave his deputy in charge and hurry back to Cuba. The high-handedness of the Spanish occupation and their incessant demands for gold provoked a general uprising. Alvarado ordered a massacre during the Aztec spring festival of Huizilpochtli. When Cortes returned on 25 June 1520, he had on his hands a full-blown crisis. The causeways were cut, the bridges taken away and the net closed. The Spaniards faced acute shortages of food and drinking water. Cortes was forced to retreat.

Around this time, Montezuma died under mysterious circumstances. The Aztecs continued to fight the Spaniards. 600 conquistadores and many more of their Tlaxcalan allies were killed in what is known as the Night of Tears. Cortes was forced to retreat to Tlaxcala to plan his strategy against the newly elected king, Cuatemoc. By then, the Aztecs were dying from the dreaded smallpox which had come with the Europeans. With just 180 soldiers and 30 horses, Cortes moved into Tenochtitlan as the Aztecs prepared for their final stand. The Aztecs thought they could see omens foretelling that their end was near, and because of this the Emperor chose to give up his life.

The conquest of Mexico had taken two years. Cortes became Captain-General of New Spain in Mexico and was showered with honours by Charles V. From Mexico, the Spaniards extended their control over Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Honduras.

Above: A European sketch of Tenochtitlan, sixteenth century.

Below: The grand stairway that led to the temples in the centre of Tenochtitlan, now a ruin in Mexico City.



Pizarro and the Incas



A gold statuette of a woman, Peru. This was found in a tomb which the Spanish missed, and therefore was not melted down.

Pizarro, in contrast to Cortes, was uneducated and poor when he joined the army and found his way to the Caribbean Islands in 1502. He had heard stories about the Inca kingdom as a land of silver and gold (*El-dor-ado*). He made repeated attempts to reach it from the Pacific. On one of his journeys back home, he was able to meet the Spanish king and show him beautifully designed gold jars of Inca workmanship. The king's greed was aroused, and he promised Pizarro the governorship of the Inca lands if he conquered it. Pizarro planned to follow Cortes' method, but was disconcerted to find that the situation in the Inca empire was different.

In 1532, Atahualpa secured the throne of the Inca empire after a civil war. Pizarro arrived on the scene and captured the king after setting a trap for him. The king offered a roomful of gold as ransom for his release – the most extravagant ransom recorded in history – but Pizarro did not honour his promise. He had the king executed, and his followers went on a looting spree. This was followed by the occupation of the country. The cruelty of the conquerors provoked an uprising in 1534 that continued for two years, during which time thousands died in war and due to epidemics.

In another five years, the Spanish had located the vast silver mines in Potosi (in Upper Peru, modern Bolivia) and to work these they made the Inca people into slaves.

Cabral and Brazil

The Portuguese occupation of Brazil occurred by accident. In 1500, a grand procession of ships set out from Portugal for India, headed by Pedro Alvares Cabral. To avoid stormy seas, he made a wide loop around West Africa, and found to his surprise that he had reached the coast of present-day Brazil. As it happened, this eastern part of South America was within the section assigned on the map to Portugal by the Pope, so they regarded it as indisputably theirs.

The Portuguese were more eager to increase their trade with western India than with Brazil, which did not promise any gold. But there was one natural resource there which they exploited: timber. The brazilwood tree, after which the Europeans named the region, produced a beautiful red dye. The natives readily agreed to cut the trees and carry the logs to the ships in exchange for iron knives and saws, which they regarded as marvels. ('For one sickle, knife or comb [they] would bring loads of hens, monkeys, parrots, honey, wax, cotton thread and whatever else these poor people had'.)

'Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood? Don't you have wood in your country?' a native asked a French priest. At the end of their discussion, he said 'I can see that you are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience

and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares.'

This trade in timber led to fierce battles between Portuguese and French traders. The Portuguese won because they decided to 'settle' in/colonise the coast. In 1534, the king of Portugal divided the coast of Brazil into fourteen hereditary 'captaincies'. To the Portuguese who wanted to live there he gave landownership rights, and the right to make the local people into slaves. Many Portuguese settlers were veterans of the wars in Goa, in India, and were brutal to the local people.

In the 1540s, the Portuguese began to grow sugarcane on large plantations and built mills to extract sugar, which was then sold in Europe. In this very hot and humid climate they depended on the natives to work the sugar mills. When the natives refused to do this exhausting and dreary work, the mill-owners resorted to kidnapping them to work as slaves.

The natives kept retreating into the forests to escape the 'slavers' and, as time went on, there were hardly any native villages on the coast; instead, there were large, well-laid-out European towns. Plantation owners were then forced to turn to another source for slaves: West Africa. This was a contrast to the Spanish colonies. A large part of the population in the Aztec and Inca empires had been used to labouring in mines and fields, so the Spanish did not need to *formally* enslave them or to look elsewhere for slaves.

In 1549, a formal government under the Portuguese king was established, with the capital in Bahia/Salvador. From this time, Jesuits started to go out to Brazil. European settlers disliked them because they argued for humane interaction with the natives, ventured into the forests to live in villages, and sought to teach them Christianity as a joyous religion. Above all, the Jesuits strongly criticised slavery.

Conquest, Colonies and the Slave Trade

What had begun as uncertain voyages came to have lasting consequences for Europe, the Americas and Africa.

From the fifteenth century, European maritime projects produced knowledge of *continuous sea passages* from ocean to ocean. Before this, most of these passages had been unknown to Europeans. Some were not known to anyone. No ship had penetrated the Caribbean or the Americas. The South Atlantic was wholly unexplored; no sea-going ship had ever entered its waters, much less crossed it, or sailed from it to the Pacific or the Indian Ocean. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, all these feats were accomplished.

ACTIVITY 4

Analyse the effects of contact with the Europeans on the native people of South America. Describe their reactions to the settlers and the Jesuits.

'There is no greater curse on a home or family than to be unjustly supported by the sweat of others!'

'Any man who deprives others of their freedom, and being able to restore that freedom, does not do so, is condemned!'

– Antonio Vieira, Jesuit priest in Brazil, 1640s.

For Europe, the 'discovery' of the Americas had consequences for others besides the initial voyagers. The influx of gold and silver helped further expansion of international trade and industrialisation. Between 1560 and 1600, a hundred ships *each year* carried silver from South

American mines to Spain. But it was not Spain and Portugal that benefited. They did not invest their huge income in further trade, or in building up a merchant navy. Instead, it was the countries bordering the Atlantic, particularly England, France, Belgium and Holland, that took advantage of the 'discoveries'. Their merchants formed joint-stock companies and sent out trading expeditions, established colonies and introduced Europeans to the products of the New World, including tobacco, potatoes, cane-sugar, cacao and rubber.

Europe also became familiar with new crops from America, notably potatoes and chillies. These were then taken by Europeans to other countries like India.

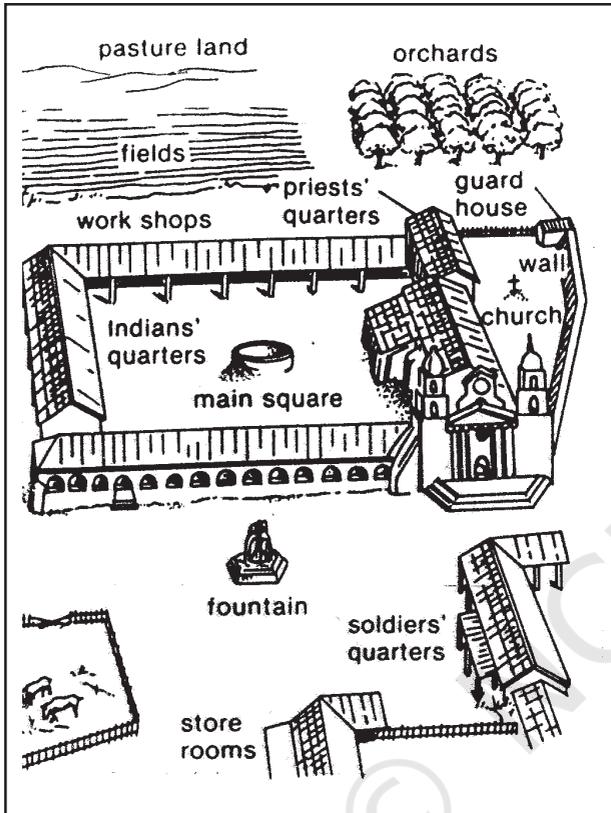
For the native people of the Americas, the immediate consequences were the physical decimation of local populations, the destruction of their way of life and their enslavement in mines, plantations and mills.

Estimates indicate that pre-conquest Mexico had a population of between 30 and 37.5 million, the Andean region a similar number while Central America had between 10 and 13 million.

The natives on the eve of the arrival of the Europeans totalled 70 million. A century and a half later, they had reduced to 3.5 million. Warfare and disease were primarily responsible for this.

The sudden destruction of the two major civilisations – those of the Aztecs and the Incas – in America highlights the contrasts between the two cultures in combat. Both with the Aztecs and the Incas, the nature of warfare played a crucial role in terrorising local inhabitants psychologically and physically. The contest also revealed a fundamental difference in values. The Spanish avarice for gold and silver was incomprehensible to the natives.

The enslavement of the population was a sharp reminder of the brutality of the encounter. Slavery was not a new idea, but the South American experience was new in that it accompanied the emerging capitalist system of production. Working conditions were horrific, but the Spanish regarded the exploitation as essential to their economic gain.



Sketch of a typical Spanish township in South America.

The capitalist system of production is one in which the means of production and distribution are owned by individuals or corporates and where competitors participate in a free market.

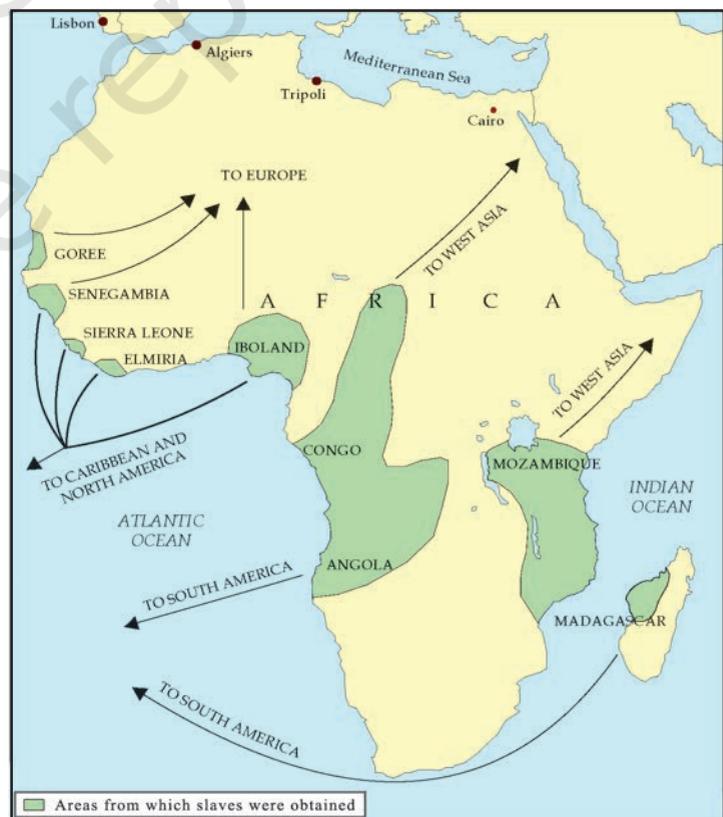
The silver mines in Peru began to function in the 1550s, and the monk Dominigo de Santo Tomas reported to the Council of the Indies that the Potosi was a mouth of hell which swallowed Indians by the thousands every year and that greedy mine owners treated them like stray animals.

In 1601, Philip II of Spain publicly banned forced labour, but made arrangements by a secret decree for its continuation. Things came to a head with the law of 1609, which gave full freedom to the local people, Christian and non-Christian alike. The European settlers were enraged, and within two years they had forced the king to revoke this law and to permit enslavement once again.

As new economic activities began – cattle farming on lands cleared of forests, and mining after the discovery of gold in 1700 – the demand for cheap labour continued. It was clear that the local people would resist enslavement. The alternative was to turn to Africa. Between the 1550s and 1880s (when slavery was abolished in Brazil) over 3,600,000 African slaves were imported into Brazil. This was almost half the total number of African slaves imported into the Americas. In 1750, there were individuals who owned as many as a thousand slaves.

From the early debates in the 1780s on abolishing slavery, there were those who argued that slavery existed in Africa prior to the entry of the Europeans, indeed slaves formed the bulk of the labour-force in the states being formed in Africa from the fifteenth century. They also pointed out that European traders were helped by Africans who helped capture young men and women to be sold as slaves, in return for crops imported from South America (maize, manioc and cassava, which became their staple foods). In his autobiography (1789), the freed slave Olaudah Equiano replied to these arguments by saying that slaves in Africa were treated as part of the family. In the 1940s, in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams was one of the first modern historians to initiate a reassessment of the suffering experienced by African slaves.

MAP 3: Africa, indicating regions from where slaves were captured



Epilogue

In the early nineteenth century, European settlers in the South American colonies were to rebel against Spain and Portugal and become independent countries, just as in 1776 the thirteen North American colonies rebelled against Britain and formed the United States of America.

South America today is also called 'Latin America'. This is because Spanish and Portuguese, two of the main languages of the continent, are part of the Latin family of languages. The inhabitants are mostly native European (called Creole), European, and African by origin. Most of them are Catholics. Their culture has many elements of native traditions mixed with European ones.

Exercises

ANSWER IN BRIEF

1. Compare the civilisation of the Aztecs with that of the Mesopotamians.
2. What were the new developments helping European navigation in the fifteenth century?
3. Give reasons for Spain and Portugal being the first in the fifteenth century to venture across the Atlantic.
4. What new food items were transmitted from South America to the rest of the world?

ANSWER IN A SHORT ESSAY

5. Write an account of the journey of an African boy of seventeen captured and taken to Brazil as a slave.
6. How did the 'discovery' of South America lead to the development of European colonialism?