

Financing Exploration

The explorers themselves may have had various motivations—wealth, faith, adventure, trade, knowledge—but they all required financial support to make their dreams possible. The funding that each explorer obtained reflected his resources, reputation, and sometimes persistence, as well as the goals of those who sponsored the expeditions.

Early European explorations of the African coast were usually small-scale endeavors that were financed by businessmen—some occupied in trade, some in slaves and plunder. The success of these minor voyages, and the profits they provided, increased the interest of adventurers, merchants, and monarchs, and exploration began to involve long-range planning, royal patronage, and substantial investments.

Christopher Columbus, generally credited with opening the Americas to Europeans, first sought the sponsorship of John II of Portugal to find a western route to Asia. When this proved unsuccessful, Columbus turned to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. After seven years of lobbying in the Spanish court, Columbus won the approval of the Spanish monarchs, who had just defeated the Moors in Granada and had newly available resources. While this provided some financial support for his expedition, Columbus also needed the assistance of the Pinzons, a shipbuilding family from Palos, Spain, who helped by outfitting his ships and recruiting sailors for his journey, as well as serving as captains of two of the ships.

John Cabot, an Italian navigator, found no support in Spain for his plans to find a western trade route to the East, so he moved to Bristol, England, in order to get backing for his plans. He obtained the sponsorship of King Henry VII and the financial support of the merchants of Bristol. Although Cabot's voyages did not achieve his goals, they did give England a basis for its claims in North America.

Magellan, whose ship was the first to circumnavigate the globe, renounced his Portuguese citizenship in order to obtain the support of Charles I of Spain. The king made an agreement with Magellan to provide him with a fleet of five vessels provisioned for two years. But Magellan also had to contend with Spanish financiers who opposed the expedition and used their influence to place men of their choosing into key positions in the fleet.

Sir Francis Drake, known as a privateer as well as an explorer, received some financial support from England's Queen Elizabeth I for his journey to sail through the Straits of Magellan and explore Australia. However, Drake was able to provide much of his own financing with the wealth he acquired raiding ships and ports on his privateering expeditions.

Queen Isabella

Queen Isabella (1451–1504) ruled the regions of Castile and Aragon jointly with her husband Ferdinand (1452–1516), and their reign effectively marked the beginning of the

unified Spanish kingdom. She is perhaps best known for sponsoring the explorations of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), which opened the Americas to European colonization. During her rule, Isabella also instituted the Inquisition in Spain, leading to the expulsion of Jews from Spain. She is often referred to as *La Catolica* (the Catholic), a title given to her by Pope Alexander VI (1431–1503).

Early Life

When she was three years old, Isabella was brought to the court at Castile, where her half-brother, Henry IV, was king. In order to appease nobles who opposed Henry's rule, he accepted Isabella as his heir in 1468. But when she married Ferdinand of Aragon without his approval, Henry named his daughter, Juana, as heir. When Henry died in 1474, Isabella's reign began with a civil war over her succession. By the time the war was settled and Isabella ascended the throne of Castile in 1479, Ferdinand had become ruler of Aragon. The two monarchs ruled with equal authority in both kingdoms, unifying the Spanish nation under the motto "Tanto monta, monta tanto—Isabel como Fernando," ("As much as the one is worth so much is the other—Isabella as Ferdinand").

La Catolica

Isabella's Christianity often reflected her crusading inclinations, as well as her personal piety. Shortly after Isabella and Ferdinand established her title to the throne of Castile in 1480, they began the war against Granada with the aim of "reconquering" the kingdom, which had been held by the Moors, a Muslim people, since the eighth century. At the same time, Isabella asserted her royal religious authority by appealing to Pope Sixtus IV to allow her to establish an Inquisition tribunal in Spain. Originally, the aim of the Papal Inquisition was to eliminate heresy. But in Spain the Inquisition took on a more sinister role under the infamous Chief Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada (1420–1498). Anyone suspected of opposition to the church risked torture and death, with Jewish converts facing the greatest danger. In 1492 Isabella and Ferdinand issued the Edict of Expulsion, which ordered all Jews to leave Spain.

Isabella and Columbus

By 1492 many of Isabella's early goals, particularly the conquest of Granada, had been achieved. Christopher Columbus had been petitioning the Spanish court for several years, hoping to gain sponsorship for a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to find a western route to Asia. After the victory in Granada, Isabella could turn her attention to an enterprise that offered the opportunity to find more converts for Christianity, as well as a way for Spain to compete with Portugal's control of the sea trade. The Spanish monarchs offered Columbus their support, including a large share of future profits and a hereditary governorship of all lands annexed for Spain. Columbus assembled his fleet and departed across the Atlantic.

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Queen Isabella of Spain giving money to Christopher Columbus. (c) Julio

When Columbus returned with reports of his discoveries, John II of Portugal (1455–1495) attempted to claim the territories for himself. Isabella appealed to Pope Alexander VI, also a Spaniard, to settle the dispute. The pope declared a “line of demarcation,” dividing all unexplored lands between Spain and Portugal. When the Portuguese complained that the line would impair their ability to sail around the southern tip of Africa, the line was moved, and in 1494 the parties signed the Treaty of Tordesillas in agreement of these terms. Ferdinand and Isabella could now claim all non-Christian lands west of a boundary, drawn from pole to pole, 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. Although exploration had not yet established what would be found within these limits, the treaty allowed Spain to claim all of the Americas, except Brazil, and Portugal to claim Africa and the East Indies. No other countries were considered in this division.

During her later years, Isabella concerned herself with administering the expanding Spanish empire. Columbus’s discoveries had established Spain as a world power, and Isabella and Ferdinand had established laws, negotiated treaties, arranged marriages, and created a military and maritime force that would assure its continuance. The Golden Age of Spanish exploration began with their reign.

See also Christopher Columbus

See also Kingdom of Spain

Christopher Columbus

Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) was an Italian navigator whose voyages, sponsored by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, opened the Americas to European exploration and colonization. Like many of his contemporaries, Columbus believed that it was possible to reach India and China by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1492 he set out on the voyage that did not, as he thought, provide a route to Asia but nonetheless changed the world.

Early Years

Born Cristoforo Columbo in Genoa, Italy, to a family of weavers, Columbus went to sea at an early age. He sailed the Mediterranean on both merchant and military voyages and became an experienced sailor and navigator. On one journey, in 1476, Columbus was shipwrecked off the coast of Portugal, and he made his way to Lisbon, where his younger brother, Bartholomew, worked as a cartographer. There, strongly influenced by the Portuguese explorers who sailed the African coast, Columbus began seeking financial support for an expedition to sail west across the Atlantic and discover a new route to Asia. Although some have claimed that Columbus had difficulty financing his voyage because many people at the time believed that the world was flat, in reality he was

frequently denied funding because many contemporary experts thought that the ocean was too wide to cross.

Columbus tried for several years to obtain the sponsorship of King John II of Portugal but was consistently rebuffed. In 1486 he began enlisting the backing of Queen Isabella (1451–1504) and King Ferdinand (1452–1516) of Spain. Although Columbus was initially unable to convince them to support his journey, in the spring of 1492 the monarchs had a change of heart. The recent conquest of Moorish Granada had freed up some royal resources and the Spaniards wanted both to spread Christianity and to be able to compete economically with Portugal. Columbus began making final plans for his voyage.

First Voyage

Columbus's first expedition left from Palos, Spain, on August 3, 1492. His fleet consisted of three small ships: the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*. Although celestial navigation (using the stars to plot a journey's course) was just being developed, it is likely that Columbus used the less sophisticated and reliable form of navigation known as dead reckoning (a method using a mathematical formula of speed, time, and course to determine one's position). After a brief stop at the Canary Islands, Columbus sailed west until he landed on a small island, now generally thought to have been one of the Bahamas, on October 12, 1492. Taking possession of this land in the name of the Spanish throne, he took natives aboard his ship and again went searching for China, instead finding Cuba and Hispaniola.

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Christopher Columbus. (c) Archivo Iconografico S.A./CORBIS

On Christmas Eve, the *Santa Maria* was wrecked off the north coast of Hispaniola, and Columbus decided to leave some men there to found a colony, which he called *La Navidad*. He himself returned to Spain on the *Niña*. When he reached Spain, he was hailed for his achievements and commissioned as *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. He began making plans for a much larger expedition, still searching for the elusive route to the East.

Second Voyage

In October 1493 Columbus again sailed west across the Atlantic, this time with seventeen ships, 1,500 colonists, and livestock including horses, sheep, and cattle. When he arrived at Hispaniola, Columbus discovered that the original settlement had been destroyed. According to the natives, there had been dissent amongst the colonists. Some left, and the remaining settlers kidnapped women from a neighboring tribe, whose members killed the Europeans and burned the fort. Columbus established a new colony and formed regular military expeditions to subdue an increasingly unfriendly native population. Although he searched for the Chinese mainland and scouted for gold, for most of this expedition

Columbus spent his time governing the new settlement. His focus had shifted from exploration to colonization.

When Columbus returned to Spain in 1496, Ferdinand and Isabella, fearing they had been too generous and responding to complaints of his inadequate administration, revoked Columbus's monopoly on exploration and settlement in the New World and began to promote other expeditions.

Third Voyage

Columbus had more difficulty organizing the funds and gathering the crew for his third voyage, since the lure of adventure and the promise of wealth had been ruined by the poor results of the second voyage. With only six ships, Columbus divided his third voyage into two fleets. One fleet proceeded to Hispaniola to bring supplies to the settlers. The other, under Columbus's command, sailed farther south and made landfall in Trinidad. The expedition then discovered the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, and Columbus realized that he had found a continent. But he soon headed back to Hispaniola to continue his unsuccessful governance of the colony there. When colonists protested the awful conditions in the settlement, Spain appointed an independent governor who sent Columbus, in chains, back to Spain.

Fourth and Last Voyage

Hoping to revive his reputation, Columbus spent several years gathering a fleet for his fourth expedition. As he said in a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, "I went to sea from the most tender age and have continued in a sea life to this day. Whoever gives himself up to this art wants to know the secrets of Nature here below. It is more than forty years that I have been thus engaged. Wherever any one has sailed, there I have sailed."

On May 11, 1502, he sailed again, with four small ships, looking for a strait that would provide a western route to Asia. Although the local governor of Hispaniola denied his ships shelter from a hurricane, Columbus's fleet weathered the storm and sailed to the coast of Central America. Based on the native population's reports of an ocean that was only a few days' journey away, Columbus believed that he was very close to the strait that would provide a passage to Asia. He had, in fact, reached what would become the future site of the Panama Canal.

Without locating any strait and after suffering many storms and hardships, the expedition was marooned in Jamaica. Although the governor of Hispaniola once again refused assistance, the expedition was finally rescued and sailed for Spain. Columbus's death, in 1506, was relatively unnoticed.

Although Columbus was not the first explorer to reach the Americas, his voyages represent a turning point in history because they ushered in an era of unprecedented exploration and conquest. His personal legacy is a matter of dispute. While some historians view him as a visionary and heroic figure, others see him as a ruthless and

ambitious conqueror whose voyages mark the beginning of the brutal destruction of Native American peoples.