

Imperial Rivalries, Part One: Spain, Portugal and Pope Divvy New World

By Peter C. Mancall, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History on 04.26.17

Word Count **826**

Level **MAX**



The Portuguese arrived in Porto Seguro, Brazil, in 1500. As part of the Treaty of Tordesillas, Portugal had rights to colonize the territory. Image via public domain

The first in a three-part series

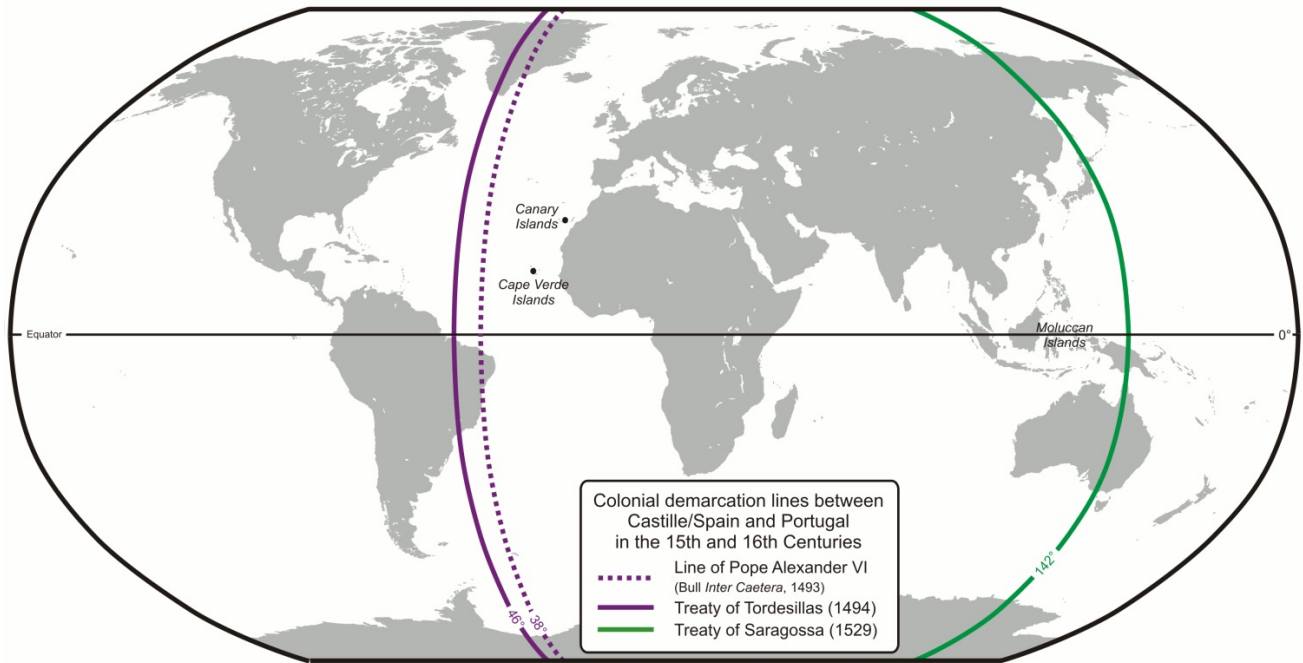
When Christopher Columbus made his plans to sail westward across the Atlantic, he first set off across Europe to find sponsors. His brother Bartholomew went to the court of the English King Henry VII (who turned him down, much to the regret of later Britons who realized the opportunity they had missed). Eventually, Columbus received support from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. He sailed westward in search of a new route to the riches of East Asia and the Southwest Pacific, but he also ventured forth as an agent of a particular European state. Columbus therefore claimed (and renamed) new lands for Spain and planted the Spanish flag to mark its expanded territory. Columbus' activities before and during his historic journey reflected his understanding of European politics in the late 15th century. Venturing westward was too expensive for an individual to fund independently, hence governments sponsored such voyages. European policymakers knew that they were always

competing with each other. They also understood that their rivalries must not offend the church for religious authority belonged to the pope and his court in Rome, along with his representatives across Europe.

England was at odds with France, and France competed with the Spanish kingdoms. Long-distance military expeditions against more distant foreign powers were relatively rare because they were so expensive. European crusaders ventured out to retake the Holy Land from the late 11th to the late 13th centuries, hoping to lay claim to Jerusalem and protect it from the growing power of Muslim states, but also to make a tidy profit in trade with Middle Eastern merchants. Along the way, these Christian warriors often raided the territories they passed through, engendering animosities that lasted for generations.

Spain and Portugal and the Pope

The most important national rivalries for the Western Hemisphere took shape after 1492. The same year that Columbus sailed westward, the combined forces of the Spanish kingdoms under the Castilian Queen Isabella and the Aragonese King Ferdinand reclaimed Iberia from the Islamic Moors. They also expelled Jews who lived there, or forced those who remained to convert to Christianity (at which point they became known as Marranos or conversos). Both actions endeared the monarchs to Christian leaders. On May 4, 1493, Pope Alexander VI (a Spaniard), after hearing about Columbus' discovery of a "new world," rewarded Ferdinand and Isabella with the Bull of Donation, also known as the *Inter caetera*, which authorized Spain to colonize and exploit American lands despite earlier papal documents that had granted Portugal control of newly discovered regions. The following year the Spanish and Portuguese rulers, whose ships were then engaged in the most far-reaching European exploratory ventures, agreed to the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas, which established a geographical line approximately 1,200 nautical miles west of the Cape Verde islands. This boundary entitled the Portuguese to lay claim to Brazil, which they colonized in the 16th century. Spain, meanwhile, could claim everything that lay to the west of the line.



These papally sanctioned agreements propelled the Spanish and Portuguese to establish colonies in the Western Hemisphere as well as (for the Portuguese) areas in and near the Indian Ocean and the southwestern Pacific. In addition to the voyages of Columbus, the Spanish sent other would-be conquerors to lay claim to new territories, including Hernán Cortés, who led Spanish forces to victory over the Aztecs in Mexico in the late 1510s, and Francisco Pizarro, whose army emerged victorious over the Incas in Peru in the 1530s. In the years that followed, Spanish conquerors raised their standard across much of southwest North America as well as Florida. Spanish and Portuguese colonizers eagerly extracted wealth from these new territories, especially in the form of hordes of gold, silver and precious jewels. They made sure to send gifts of thanks to their religious patrons. The pope purportedly used some of the gold sent by the Spanish to cover the ceiling of Rome's ancient basilica and one of its greatest churches, Santa Maria Maggiore. The extraction of this wealth came at a high cost not only to America's indigenous peoples, who witnessed the desecration of temples to satisfy the lust of the conquistadores but also to humanity's history and art, since the newcomers typically melted native icons and thereby erased ancient cultures.

Peter C. Mancall is a professor of history at the University of Southern California. His publications include "Fatal Journey: The Final Expedition of Henry Hudson — A Tale of Mutiny and Murder in the Arctic" (2009), "Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America" (2007) and "Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology" (2006). He is currently working on "American Origins," which will be the first volume of the "Oxford History of the United States."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?
- (A) the power of the pope over European countries
 - (B) the impact of colonization in South America
 - (C) the lands acquired by Muslim states
 - (D) the move to Christianize all of Spain

- 2 Read the selection from the article.

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Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this selection?

- (A) Most European countries were unable to compete with Spain.
 - (B) Spanish explorers had less interest in North America.
 - (C) No other European powers were interested in Mexico.
 - (D) Cortés and Pizarro competed for support from Spain.
- 3 Which of the following options conveys an accurate political perspective of Europe in the 1400s?
- (A) Political relationships between countries were tempered by their recognition of the pope's power.
 - (B) Political alliances were built between countries in order to advance the Christian religion.
 - (C) Political agreements between European countries helped stem the power of Muslim states.
 - (D) Political rivalries dictated which countries became successful empires.

- 4 Which sentence MOST accurately summarizes the perspective of Ferdinand and Isabella regarding the unification of the Spanish kingdom?
- (A) They believed it was necessary to expel Islamic or Jewish people, or force them to convert to Christianity, in order to secure their own power.
 - (B) They believed that unifying the country would help them gain favor with the pope, and he would recognize their claims in the New World.
 - (C) They believed that Islam and Judaism presented a danger in Spain, and the only solution was expulsion or conversion.
 - (D) They believed that the pope would reward them for building a Christian kingdom, and help them finance more conquests.