

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

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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

Christopher Columbus needed money from kings to pay the cost of sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. Sailing westward in 1492 was too expensive for any individual, so governments were needed to pay for such voyages. His brother, Bartholomew, first went to the court of the English King Henry VII, who turned him down. Years later, the English knew they had made a mistake.

Columbus finds money, support for his voyage

Columbus' activities before and during his historic journey showed how he understood European governments in the late 1400s that needed money and the support of the pope. European leaders in different countries knew that they were always competing with each other. England was at odds with France, and France competed with the Spanish kingdoms.

Long-distance battles against more distant foreign powers did not happen often because they were so expensive. These countries also understood that their rivalries must not offend the church. At that time, the pope in Rome and his religious leaders in the European countries had great power and influence when decisions were made.

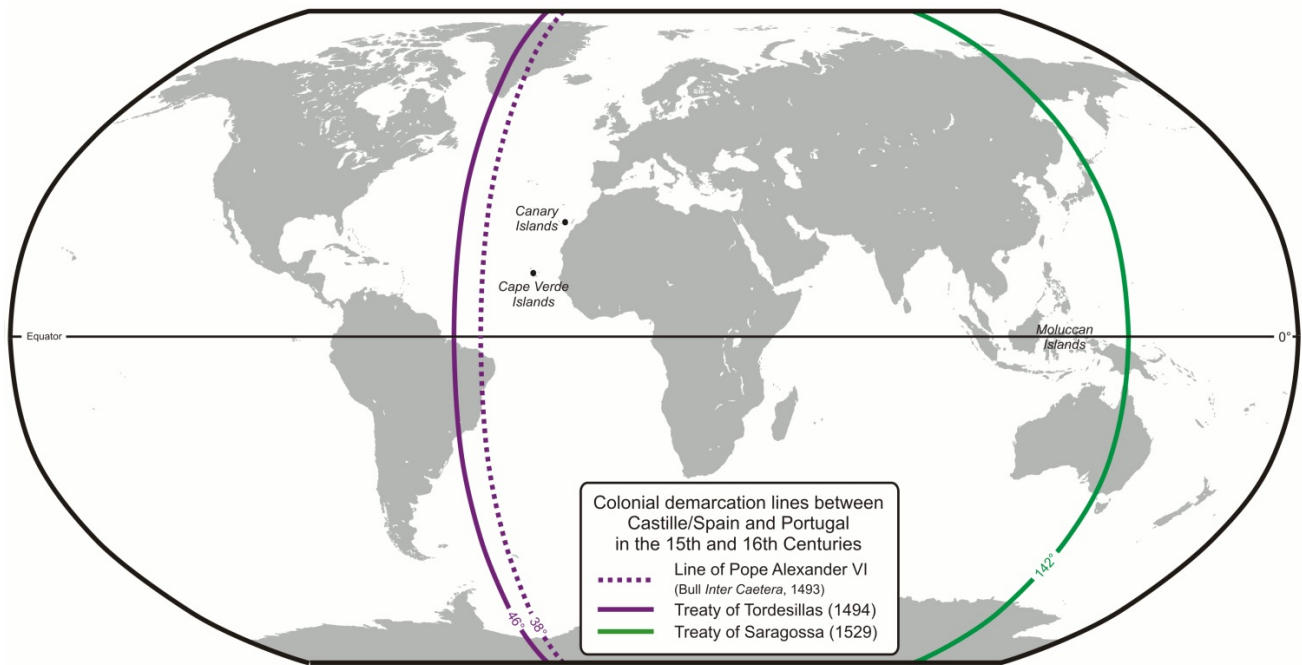
For the previous 300 years, European countries carried out crusades to the Middle East to show their support for the pope. European crusaders hoped to claim Jerusalem for the church and protect it from the growing power of Muslim empires. But also they wanted to make Portugal profits in trade with Middle Eastern merchants. Along the way, these Christian warriors often raided the territories they passed through and made many enemies. These crusades cost a lot of money. Ocean travel might be a better way to find riches.

Eventually, Columbus received support from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain and sailed westward in search of a new route to the riches of East Asia and the Southwest Pacific. But he was also an agent of a particular European state: Spain. Columbus planted the Spanish flag in these new territories, gave them new names and claimed them for Spain.

A line is drawn between Spain and Portugal

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 Queen Isabella of Castille and King Ferdinand of Aragon reclaimed Iberia, which included Spain and Portugal, from the Moors. The Moors were not Christian. They were followers of Islam. The Jews who lived in Spain were forced to leave. Those who remained had to convert to Christianity.

Defeating the Moors and forcing out the Jews made King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella very popular with the pope and Christian leaders. After hearing about Columbus' discovery of a "new world," Pope Alexander VI, who was born in Spain, rewarded Ferdinand and Isabella.



On May 4, 1493, in a papal law called "Inter caetera," the pope gave Spain permission to colonize and control American lands. An earlier papal law had given Portugal control of newly discovered regions. The Portuguese were not happy that they had been left out of the new ruling, so the following year the Spanish and Portuguese rulers agreed to the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas. A line was drawn in the ocean about 1,200 miles west of the coast of Africa. This line allowed the Portuguese to lay claim to Brazil. In the 1500s, Portugal started new colonies there. Spain, meanwhile, could claim everything that lay to the west of the line. The Spanish and Portuguese also went on to establish colonies in and near the Indian Ocean and the southwestern Pacific.

New territories, new riches

In addition to the voyages of Columbus, the Spanish sent other would-be conquerors to lay claim to new territories. Hernán Cortés, a Spanish explorer and soldier, led a group of Spaniards in victory over the Aztecs in Mexico around 1520, and Francisco Pizarro's army emerged victorious over the Incan empire in Peru in the 1530s. In the years that followed, Spanish conquerors planted their flags across much of southwest North America as well as Florida. Spanish and Portuguese colonizers eagerly extracted wealth from these new territories, especially in gold, silver and precious jewels. They made sure to send gifts of thanks to the pope and his leaders, and it was reported that the pope used some of the gold sent by the Spanish to cover the ceilings of great churches in Rome.

These actions by the conquering Spanish included melting down the golden statues of the temple gods worshiped by the native peoples living in the Americas. These acts erased their cultural and religious history.

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."