

1492

THE WORLD ON THE BRINK OF EUROPEAN EXPANSION; THE AZTEC AND INCA EMPIRES AT THEIR PEAK

The European discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 was one of the major turning points of world history, an event that began Europe's progress from its situation at the margins of the known world to a position of global dominance. The significance of the discovery did not become evident for several decades, however.

Columbus's voyage across the Atlantic, in the service of Castile, and the parallel voyages of exploration along the African coast by the Portuguese were the product of a European sense of vulnerability and exclusion. Europeans resented having to buy eastern spices and Chinese silks through Muslim middlemen at great cost. Europeans were also alarmed by the resurgence of Muslim power represented by the Ottoman Turk empire, which in 1453 extinguished the sad remnants of the Byzantine empire by conquering Constantinople.

The Portuguese hoped to trade directly with the east, and gain allies against the Muslims, by finding a route around Africa. This was achieved by Bartolomeu Dias in 1487-88. Columbus believed he could do the same by sailing west across the Atlantic: it was soon realized that he had actually discovered an unsuspected 'New World'. The Aztec and Inca empires, the greatest states that the Americas had so far seen, were equally unaware of the existence of the Old World.

China, in 1492 the world's richest and most technologically advanced state, had turned inwards. Earlier in the 15th century the Ming emperors had sent a series of great naval expeditions to Southeast Asia, India and East Africa to announce to the known world that China was a great power again after the years of Mongol occupation. But a resurgence of Mongol power forced the Ming to abandon their maritime enterprises and concentrate on fortifying their northern frontier.

Five Largest Cities 000s (approximate)

