

# European Colonialism

Colonies have existed since ancient times when the Greeks set out to colonise the coastal areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The purpose of colonies, however, varied over the centuries: trade outposts were founded as well as military settlements in order to control the newly conquered land. Additionally, some territories such as Australia served as convict colonies. Unequal treatment of different regions or ethnic groups within one country is called internal colonialism, whereas the 'traditional' image of a colonial empire is that of overseas possessions.

## Motivations for the European conquest of the New World

Historians generally recognise three main motives for European exploration and colonisation: God, gold, and glory. Religious motivations can be traced back to the Crusades (11<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) and particularly in the strong Catholic nations of Spain and Portugal, religious zeal motivated rulers to convert Natives of conquered territories. After the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire (1453), Europeans also sought to bypass the Turks in order to avoid taxes on their trade routes. Discovery of new territories increased competition between European countries and motivated Portugal and Spain to colonise quickly and aggressively. In addition, the discoveries were made possible by new astronomical tools, an understanding of the currents and wind patterns across the Atlantic ocean and new ships such as the caravel. [adapted from Khan Academy]



## The Age of Discovery

The first country that attempted to reach outward was Portugal, which set its sights on the west coast of Africa before becoming Spain's chief rival in the conquest of the New World. The ensuing exchange of goods, techniques, and disease among Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans is known as the Columbian Exchange. The Spanish Conquistadores were considered to be particularly ruthless and cruel: after Francisco Pizarro had conquered the Inca territories, he had their last ruler, Atahualpa, killed in 1533 – even after having received a large ransom for the ruler's freedom. Other countries were soon to follow: England, France and the Netherlands tried to settle in prosperous areas which would benefit trade but these additional settlements often led to conflicts between the colonial powers.

## Consequences

Colonisation ruptured many ecosystems, bringing in new organisms while eliminating others. In addition, the Europeans brought many diseases with them, with decimated Native American populations. Natural resources were ruthlessly exploited and the shortage of workers led to additional slaves being brought to the colonies from Africa. [adapted from Khan Academy]

