



The Columbian Exchange

The arrival of Europeans in the Americas set off what became known as the Columbian Exchange. Now ideas, people, plants, and animals weren't just spreading within world zones. They were also regularly spreading between them for the first time in history. And it increased complexity in the Americas, in Europe, and across the entire world.



<p>0:00</p> <p>A map of the U.S. with milk, Ireland with a potato, India with peppers, and Italy with tomatoes rotate with a list of foods on the right.</p>	<p>Picture a different reality. There are no cows in the US, no potatoes in Ireland, no chili peppers in India, and no tomatoes in Italy. Actually, a few centuries ago, that was reality.</p>
<p>0:18</p> <p><i>A world map highlights different world zones, then shows foods and animals in the regions.</i></p>	<p>Before the 1500s, the inhabited world was basically divided into four world zones: Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, Australasia, and the Pacific Islands. Each zone developed distinct ecosystems, plant and animal species, and human societies. And for the most part, they all stayed in their zone. That means potatoes, chilies, and tomatoes only lived in the Americas. Cows only lived in Afro-Eurasia. and most people only lived in the zone they were born.</p>
<p>0:51</p> <p><i>Post cards with videos of world zones. A world map shows different trade networks around the world with illustrations of travelers, boats, and caravans moving along dotted paths.</i></p>	<p>But people did travel, connect to new places, and trade goods between regions within those world zones. For example, road networks in the Andes and Meso-America supported trade among the Inca and Aztec people, and Polynesians traveled and traded across the vast distances separating Pacific islands. Some of the most well-developed trade routes were in Afro-Eurasia. There people built up networks like the Silk Roads, a series of routes that stretched from modern China to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the Indian Ocean and Trans Saharan networks. These roots helped goods and ideas spread across Afro-Eurasia.</p>
<p>1:31</p> <p><i>Images show shipbuilding, navigation tools, weapons, and disease, followed stamps with images of people with smallpox. Then European ships at sea, explorers like Columbus aboard, and maps tracing their routes across the oceans.</i></p>	<p>People shared ship building technology, nautical maps, and navigation tools. They made weapons and gunpowder, and they built up resistance to diseases like smallpox. The technologies moving across these routes eventually helped Europeans develop the navigation and ship building technology needed to cross oceans. Then Spain and Portugal used this technology as they sought sea routes in the Indian Ocean and China. But when Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to find a path to Asia in 1492, he accidentally ended up in the Americas. That slight miscalculation would change the world.</p>
<p>2:12</p> <p>An engraving of Vespucci meeting an Indigenous person. A world map shows stamps with people, animals, and crops with dotted lines. Columbus appears on ships, then foods from the Americas are shown with their origins and are mailed across the ocean. Image of a pineapple followed by a potato and corn in the ocean.</p>	<p>The arrival of Europeans in the Americas set off what became known as the Columbian Exchange. Now ideas, people, plants, and animals weren't just spreading within world zones, they were also regularly spreading between them for the first time in history. And it increased complexity in the Americas, in Europe, and across the entire world. When Europeans went back to Afro-Eurasia, they brought stuff with them from the Americas. The tomatoes and chilies that had lived in Peru, Ecuador, and Mexico soon found new homes in Italian and Indian kitchens. Pineapples left their tropical homes and became a status symbol in Europe, and potatoes and corn moved across the ocean to quickly become some of the most important crops across Afro-Eurasia.</p>
<p>3:01</p>	<p>These new foods helped the Afro-Eurasia population grow, leading to more workers and more people who wanted to travel between world zones in search of new opportunities. And as Afro-Eurasians poured into the</p>



<p>A world map shows population growth, ships crossing the Atlantic, and an airmail envelope with stamps of animals and crops.</p>	<p>Americas, they brought stuff, too. They introduced crops like sugarcane and wheat and animals like cows, horses, and even honeybees.</p>
<p>3:25</p> <p>Images of Europeans raising a flag and weapons, Indigenous people appear on maps separated by a hand, indigenous communities with diseases, battles between armored soldiers and Indigenous fighters, people are chained and hands exchange crops like potatoes, sugar, and wheat.</p>	<p>But this incredible exchange of resources also had some significant downsides. In the Americas, European conquerors and colonists broke up communities, forced people from their homes, and enslaved them. They brought diseases like smallpox and measles, which killed millions of people. And they used their advanced weapons and formed alliances with local populations to take over the weakened indigenous communities. And while the Columbian Exchange gave people in both Europe and the Americas access to more kinds of food and animals, biodiversity began to shrink. People prioritized crops like potatoes, sugar, and wheat, which led to less variety in native plants, and it eventually caused problems.</p>
<p>4:12</p> <p>Crates of potatoes, followed by an engraving of an Irish family. Cows graze in a field. Maps show bread in a cart traveling from Europe to the Americas. Engravings depict people harvesting monoculture crops, then enslaved Africans being loaded onto ships.</p>	<p>For example, while there were thousands of types of potatoes in the Americas, Ireland only grew one type. And when a disease swept through their crops in the 1800s, Ireland fell into famine. In the Americas, the newly introduced cattle grazed and trampled native plants, wiping them out and making way for European crops to take their place.</p>
<p>4:51</p> <p>Engravings show enslaved Africans in chains, overseen by men on horseback and soldiers. Cut-out figures are held by hands against a dark background. A diagram shows rows of people packed tightly in a ship. A sailing ship crosses the ocean at night. Paintings show enslaved people harvesting while families are torn apart. Ships sail under Spanish and Portuguese flags. A globe rotates, surrounded by colored rings. A globe with ships and carts moving, followed by icons of a ballot, people, and scales of justice.</p>	<p>As European colonizers prioritized the growth of monoculture cash crops like tobacco, sugar, and cotton, they also forced tens of millions of people from Africa to migrate to the Americas as a labor force in the transatlantic slave trade. This practice devastated African communities and broke up families. Millions of enslaved Africans did not survive the middle passage voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Those who did lived hard lives of forced brutal labor in a system that persisted for generations. And while they used and destroyed African and indigenous people and communities, European nations grew wealthy. They gained influence and power that would shape history. The Colombian exchange increased complexity across the world. The movement of people built new connections, allowing for the spread of ideas and food and shaping economies and industries. But that connection came at a steep price, it wiped out species, devastated communities, and increased inequality. Ultimately, it changed the world forever.</p>