



# The Columbian Exchange

By Eman M. Elshaikh (adapted from Khan Academy)

Christopher Columbus was no tourist. His arrival in North America led to a system of exchange that fundamentally altered the environment, economic systems, and culture across the world.

## 960L



## Overview

The popular children's poem goes "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Children have recited the poem for years while studying the voyages of the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506). Today, we know other Europeans reached North America before Columbus. Why are Columbus' voyages so important?

Christopher Columbus' arrival in North America connected people all over the world, and those connections still exist today. It also began a chain of events that dramatically changed the environment, economic systems, and culture across the world. This transfer of goods, people, microbes,<sup>1</sup> and ideas is often called the Columbian Exchange.

This exchange created new global networks and changed communities in the Americas. It created new networks of trade and exchange. All this trading began a period of rapid cultural change.



*Infographic showing the transfer of goods and diseases from the Columbian Exchange. By BHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.*

As people learned about new products, they began producing, distributing, and using products in new ways. These patterns changed the social and economic organization of the Americas. This included the rise of the Atlantic slave trade and other labor systems.

The Columbian Exchange also had some unintentional but devastating results due to the transfer of diseases. In the Americas, millions died from disease, which caused populations to decline. This in turn affected the environment and economic systems.

<sup>1</sup> Microbes are living things too small to be seen with the naked eye. They're in the air, and they're crawling all over you right now. Don't panic, because most are harmless or even good for you. The bad ones can carry diseases through bacteria and viruses. The people, plants, and animals that were moved around during the Columbian Exchange unknowingly brought new microbes to places that had no defenses against them.

## The spread of disease

Possibly the most dramatic, immediate impact of the Columbian Exchange was the spread of European diseases like smallpox and measles. In contrast, very few diseases traveled from the Americas to Afro-Eurasia. Millions of indigenous people died from European diseases.

Before the Europeans arrived, there were between 35 million and 75 million<sup>2</sup> indigenous people in the Americas. Some regions had large urban areas like Tenochtitlan and Cusco. These cities were some of the largest in the world.



*Illustration from the sixteenth-century Florentine Codex compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún showing the effects of small pox on indigenous populations. By Bernardino de Sahagún, Public domain.*

Most people in the Americas were unable to fight off Afro-Eurasian diseases. There were three main reasons for this. First, there wasn't much genetic diversity in the small group of humans that initially crossed over from Asia. Second, Indigenous Americans had few domesticated animals, which are the source of many human diseases. Finally, as a result of this lack of diseases, Indigenous Americans did not have immunities that those in Afro-Eurasia had built up over generations.

Disease outbreaks changed the population, which affected both the environment and the economy. Having fewer people around helped forests grow back, but it also caused a labor shortage. That need for labor led to the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, which brought African diseases like malaria to the Americas.

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<sup>2</sup> There are different ideas for how many people lived in the Americas before the Europeans arrived. This is mainly because there were no written records of population at this time. Some historians estimate the population could have been as high as 112 million people. Others claim that it could be as low as 8 million. These differences are discussed in the article later in this lesson called "The Disastrous Effects of Increased Global Interactions."

## From east to west

Diseases caused the population of the Americas to decrease, making it possible for European settlers to change the areas they settled. They often did this by using the labor of enslaved Africans. European settlers brought many plants and animals from Afro-Eurasia to the Americas. The only domesticated animals in Indigenous American communities were llamas and alpacas and some small animals. There were no other large mammals in the Americas that could be domesticated.

Europeans brought horses, cattle, and pigs, among others. These animals changed agricultural practices and transportation. Horses helped Indigenous Americans hunt buffalo. Cattle became important in Indigenous American society for meat, hide, and transportation. Europeans also brought wheat, sugar, bananas, and other crops. These crops changed how crops were made and sold.

Crops are for eating. However, some crops called cash crops are grown to money. Many Europeans wanted to get rich by selling cash crops grown in the Americas, like sugar, coffee, and cotton.

Europeans began growing huge amounts of cash crops to make more money, but they needed more workers to grow the crops. They began bringing enslaved peoples from other places. Spanish settlers used a type of enslavement called the *encomienda* to control Indigenous American workers. Later, many of these workers died from diseases.

Europeans dealt with that problem by forcibly bringing enslaved people from West Africa to the Americas. Over the next few hundred years, more than twelve million enslaved people were brought to the Americas. You will learn more about the slave trade later in this era.

## From west to east

Plants from Afro-Eurasia (the “Old World”) did not really affect the diets of Indigenous Americans. However, plants from the Americas (the “New World”, to the Europeans) transformed life in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Plants changed food and culture all over the world. Italian food is known for using tomatoes, but tomatoes didn’t exist in Italy before the Columbian Exchange.

New plants changed many societies. Many new crops such as potatoes and maize could feed people easily, and they were easier to grow in difficult environments. Europeans began growing more of them. In Ireland, potatoes helped feed the Irish people, causing the population and cities to grow.

The Columbian Exchange completely changed the world. People began producing and distributing goods differently. Millions of people came from Afro-Eurasia to the Americas—some by choice, others by force—to make products, which were sold around the world. These goods continued to move around growing trade networks, which created the webs of exchange that shape the world we live in today.

As people moved from east to west, they formed new communities in the Americas. Many of those communities were organized by new systems of labor, like slavery. At the same time, existing communities in the Americas were devastated by disease or had to move.

## Eman M. Elshaikh

The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

## Image credits

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