

II. Life in Europe's Major Countries c.1492

A. As usual, kings rule.

1. For all of European history until the time of the American Revolution in 1776 AD, which set off great changes in Europe, monarchy was the norm.
2. From the start of European history c.476 AD, when tribes conquered other tribes, the conquerors would become a group of rulers called the “lords,” or the “nobility,” with their leader as the king.
3. Society was organized in a strict hierarchy with conquered people forced to become “serfs”—farm laborers who were forced to stay on a certain part of the land and work it for the lords.
4. This organization of society is known as *feudalism*.

B. France and England: “Worst Enemies Forever”

1. When Columbus sailed in 1492, the Europe he departed included among others two nations—France and England—that had become terrible enemies.
2. Their people were of different tribes—France was conquered by the Franks and England was ruled by the Angles and Saxons, but their hatred was made much greater by the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) between them.
3. This war was fought because of a third group, the Normans (the Vikings) who had invaded parts of both countries.
 - a) A Norman conqueror in France had become the vassal (servant) of the king of France in exchange for being given the land called afterwards “Normandy.”
 - b) As “Duke” of Normandy, one of his ancestors then conquered all of England, becoming its king.
 - c) This set of a four hundred year argument between the kings of France and those who were supposed to be their servants, the dukes of Normandy, who were also the kings of England. The argument was simply over the fact that the king of France was technically the ruler of any duke of his, but that the Dukes of Normandy were in fact more powerful than their king because they were kings of another country as well.
 - d) Wishing to be rulers of France as well as England, the kings of England tried to conquer France in a long series of wars lasting 116 years, which together historians have called the “Hundred Years’ War.”
4. The French were ultimately victorious in this war, so the kings of England lost all their land in France, and the link between the two countries created by the Normans was completely broken.
5. By the end of the war, the French king had become one of the most powerful leaders of France, and his people had become very loyal to him—especially in their common hatred for the English!

C. Spain and Portugal: Born and Raised in the “Reconquista”

1. Nearly Eight Hundred Years of Religious War
 - a) Around the time of the fall of Rome, a European tribe called the Visigoths conquered the Roman province of “Hispania”—what we know today as Spain and Portugal.
 - b) c.711 AD, however, their territory was invaded from Africa by a flood of invaders representing the new religion of Islam, which had been started in Arabia c.622 AD by a man named Muhammad, and rapidly spread outward in a wave of religious conquest known in Islam as “jihad.”
 - c) This set off a struggle between the European Christians and the invading Muslims (followers of Islam) that lasted all the way until 1492—the very year Columbus sailed, of course!
 - d) The main purpose of the centuries of warfare was the reconquest of the land that once belonged to the Christians but had been lost to the invading Muslims. (“Reconquista” is Spanish for “reconquest.”)
2. The Formation of Separate Countries
 - a) Along the way, Portugal—a small region with its own native tribes and (re-)conquering heroes—became an independent country.
 - b) Although the Portuguese and the Spanish had a common enemy in the Muslims, they could not live together as one people themselves. By the time of Columbus’s voyage, the two countries were nearly as fierce opponents as France and England had become.
3. The Timing of Columbus’s Voyage
 - a) Columbus sailed in 1492 for a reason. The king and queen of Spain were too busy up to that point fighting the last phase of the Reconquista.
 - b) Only once the last Muslims were expelled from Spain did they have the money to spare to provide ships and supplies to the mariner who promised them a short-cut to Asia, completely avoiding the Muslims who were otherwise in the way, straight to China!

D. The Disputed Center of the European World

1. The final major piece of the European puzzle in the time of Columbus was a large kind of country in the center of Europe called the “Holy Roman Empire.”
2. It had been formed when the kings of Germany had conquered Italy all the way down to Rome and made a bargain with the leaders of Christianity, the popes, who had lived in Rome ever since Roman times.
3. The popes needed protection during the Dark Ages, and the German kings needed help to keep their rebellious dukes under control.
4. The kings promised to protect the popes, and in exchange they were given the title of “Holy Roman Emperor” of Europe, along with a promise from the popes to support them by using their religious authority to command the dukes to behave themselves.
5. In truth, the arrangement was unstable. The popes expected the Holy Roman Emperors to follow their orders as leaders of Christianity. The emperors, for their part, believed that they were the greatest champions of Christianity, and need not take orders from anyone.
6. By the time of Columbus, the argument concerning ultimate authority within European Christianity between popes and emperors had dragged on so long and flared up repeatedly such that both Germany and Italy had yet to become organized as kingdoms like their neighbors, and the popes had lost much of their prestige. Neither popes nor emperors could claim a pre-eminent role in Europe.
7. A new family of emperors called the Hapsburgs had begun to grow in power like never before however. Soon after Columbus had discovered America, they would strive to unite Europe as it had never been united.